

Re:Zero Kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu (WN)

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Chapter 42: The Newest Hero And The Most Ancient Hero

——An oppressive silence had fallen over the refuge shelter.

There was the occasional faint sound of sobbing and someone nervously tapping their fingers on the floor.

Listening to that unsettling backdrop in that stillness, the girl hugged up her knees, feeling the coldness of the wall against her back.

It was a little girl with golden hair.

Resting her chin on her small, pale kneecaps, the girl gently wrapped her arm around the little bundle at her side.

Leaning against the girl's left shoulder, with his head buried between his chest and legs, was an even younger boy—— the girl's younger brother. He had been crying vehemently until now, but, apparently tired from the sobbing, had now fallen asleep.

Wet teartracks still lined his cheeks, and the corners of his eyes were red from crying. The girl wanted to softly stroke his hair, but hesitated, afraid that it might wake him.

If he could sleep, then it'd be better if he kept on sleeping.

While listening to her younger brother quietly snoring, she hoped that he might at least find some rest in his dreams. Because the reality outside those dreams would be far too harsh for her little brother to bear.

Though the same applied to his older sister, thinking this of him.

——It had been several hours since the announcement that the Control Towers to the Great Water Gates of Priestella had been taken.

That morning, the girl was out in the city plaza with her little brother when they heard the broadcast. She couldn't believe her ears when she heard those words, full of hate and malice. Worrying for her parents as she listened to that unacceptable ultimatum, the girl took her frightened little brother by the hand and ran to the shelter with the adults around her.

——If an unexpected situation occurs, quickly retreat into the shelters.
That was the emergency response procedure broadcasted from the City Hall every morning.

Honestly, the girl didn't remember paying much attention to the morning broadcasts aside from the Bard's songs. But those words nevertheless remained at the back of her mind such that she immediately remembered them when the emergency arose.

However, neither the girl nor the surrounding adults seemed to have any idea about what to do once they were inside the refuge shelter.

——Witch Cult. Control Towers. Great Water Gates. Demands.

That vile woman's ear-piercing voice showered abuse upon the frightened people.

Every one of her deranged, senseless words filled the girl and the adults' minds with dread.

Trapped in this dark shelter, they knew nothing of what was happening outside. It was only natural that as time passed with no improvement in sight, panic began to take hold.

First, the voices of mutual encouragement weakened, then gradually, anxiety and frustration festered in the silence. By the time anyone noticed it, displeasure had become apparent on the faces of everyone around them, and the atmosphere had been infested with pent-up discontent and hostile gazes.

Once it begins, there's no stopping it.
Staring at each other, shouting at each other. At worst, people begin trading punches.

Even in this shelter, this atmosphere was looming, ready to explode at the slightest touch.

[Boy: aa———h]

Yet the perilous air on the brink of drawing blood was shattered by the girl's crying little brother.

It appears that, even with the violent urge boiling inside them, the adults still had enough decency not to attack in front of a little golden-haired child crying

for help.

The sound of a child crying is powerful, in a way.

She had always thought that her little brother's crying was noisy. But, realizing what it had accomplished just now, the girl hugged her brother from behind and wept a little.

With this alone, violence had been averted inside shelter. But everyone knew that it was only a temporary calm resting upon a precarious equilibrium.

Next time, it would certainly not be something a child's cry could stop.

Knowing this, the people in the shelter, who should be tied by their shared fates, began to keep their distance from each other, not only verbally, but with their gazes and their breaths.

As if to avoid being influenced by other people's consciousnesses, they shut out everything from the external world. Who knows what might draw someone else's attention, incite their anger, and end up pulling the trigger?

So whether it was for themselves, or for everyone else, they held their breaths with rigid faces as they waited for time to pass. *"Something will change if you just wait for it"*, they left themselves to that fleeting hope.

[Girl: ———a]

Suddenly, the girl lifted her face with a quiet moan. While silently yearning for a change to come, she caught the subtle shift in the atmosphere.

Spurred to the same reaction, the people around her also turned their heads, perhaps for the first time in hours. This is because everyone living in this city knew that the faint tremble in the air—— was an indication that a broadcast was coming.

In that world of silence, it almost sounded like someone nearby sighing. That precursor to the broadcast sent a sense of physical revulsion throughout her body.

The change they were hoping for should have been something positive. But a broadcast only brings the Witch Cult's malice.

What kind of impossible demand would that shrill voice impose next?

But here, the girl's pessimistic prediction was betrayed.

{——Uhhh... so um... can everyone hear me properly? Mic-test mic-test, one-two one-two}

Instead, the voice she heard was that of a youth who sounded somewhat confused.

Unlike any other broadcast before this, the youth's voice was lacking confidence. It wasn't the charismatic voice of the man she had grown used to hearing every morning. But a young voice she had never heard before.

The girl's eyes grew round. The surrounding adults also traded gazes of doubt, unsure of what was going on.

Such sentiments would not reach the person behind the broadcasting device. Nevertheless, after doing a few more checks to make sure that the broadcast going through, the youth cleared his throat. And,

{Sounds like you guys can hear me, that's a huge relief. So, first of all, sorry for doing a broadcast all of a sudden. I probably scared you, huh. Considering the circumstances, most of you must be on edge about what I'm going to say. But don't worry. This isn't the Witch Cult broadcasting to you now. Please know that first}

[.....It's not, the Witch Cult?]

Apparently not used to talking through the device, the volume of the youth's voice fluctuated up and down.

But, since the listeneners were so overwhelmed by the content of his words, no one bothered to remark on it. Looking up overhead to where the voice seemed to be falling from, the darkened expressions on the people's faces began to shift. It was the sensation of having sighted the first glimmer of hope. Someone quietly muttered,

[Then, that means..... we're saved?]

Those words encompassed the hopes of everyone inside the shelter. *That's it. Isn't it?* If someone who's not the Witch Cult is speaking through the broadcasting device, that can only mean that they've recaptured the City Hall. If someone managed to drive the Witch Cult out of the City Hall, then maybe the Witch Cultists in the Control Towers and all over the city are also——

[The Witch Cultists... are all driven out.....?]

{Next, I have to apologize for getting everyone's hopes up, because the threat of the Witch Cult hasn't gone away yet. We were able to retake the City Hall, but they're still holed up in the Control Towers. Those guys' demands, and the danger of the city sinking beneath the water are still in play. Please understand that as well}

[— — — —]

Yet, this fleeting hope wasn't crushed by anyone else, but by the youth behind the broadcasting device himself.

It was almost as if the youth had read the minds of everyone inside the shelter. But isn't it far too cruel to extinguish their fledgling hopes this way?

Someone who had unwittingly stood up with expectation in their eyes sat down again.

Nobody can blame that someone for feeling discouraged, being told that their hope of being relived from their fears was misplaced. Instead, the fierce point of everyone's anger turned to the youth making the broadcast.

{I'm sorry}

However, the youth had apparently foreseen that the crowd's anger would fall on him.

{Where are you listening to this broadcast right now? Maybe you're in one of the refuge shelters, and I'm sure there are those who didn't manage to escape into the refuge shelters as well. Everyone must be filled with anxiety, right? I can understand what it's like to be afraid and wanting to curl up into a ball. And I guess you're all thinking "Who is this random guy toying with everyone's hopes at a time like this?"}

[— — — —]

{I'm... just a nobody. Like everyone else, I'm just being tossed around by fate, getting crushed under the unreasonable circumstances, and so scared that my legs can't stop shaking. That kind of guy. Even the job of doing this broadcast... I only accepted it after making a huge fuss. And I still think that the burden is too heavy for me. Honestly, there are others who are more

qualified to talk to everyone like this. I'm sure there are}

The youth's voice was trembling, as if speaking straight from the people's terrified and cowering hearts.

And then, what followed was simply the honest thoughts of a youth doubting his own value.

The attitude of the listeners had gone beyond surprise and disappointment, until all that was left was uncertainty.

Right now, when what everyone yearned for was hope, why did they put this youth in front of the broadcasting device?

Even the youth himself said that there were more qualified people.

But why did they send him?

{But here I am, talking to everyone. So many people greater than I am told me that I should do it. That it won't be totally pointless. But, can you hear me trembling? Speaking in front of people isn't my strong suit. I'm not good with words, and I don't have the charisma to lead anyone. I'm weak, helpless, and even here, in such an important position, I can't help but want to run away.....}

The tone of his voice gradually fell, as if dragging the listeners' hearts into the abyss.

That weak, faltering voice sounded like it was creaking through a chest shrunk by anxiety, only to tangle up at his stomach. If the youth behind that voice was within arm's reach, she would've liked to plug his mouth to shut him up.

[Boy: Big sister.....]

Before she knew it, her younger brother was awake.

Hearing that call, the girl hugged her little brother's ears as if to keep that wimp's voice from sneaking in and infecting him with its cowardice.

But, as the price for protecting her little brother, that voice continued to strike upon the girl's eardrums, drawing her into its weakness.

Still, the youth's voice went on,

{I don't know what I can do... what I really want is just to plug my ears, hold my head, hide in a corner by myself and wait for someone else to fix

everything for me.....}

[Girl: —no...]

Squeezing her eyes shut, the girl shook her head as if rejecting that sense of helplessness and despair.

I know. I know even if you don't remind me.

What the youth was saying was nothing less than the inner thoughts of every person cowering under the Witch Cult's threat.

It was the weakness eating away at the girl's heart.

It was the cowardice rooted in the depths of the adults' minds.

It was the unbearable dread tormenting her little brother's soul.

Surely, it was something nobody could do anything about.

And to have to face that unreasonable reality in spite of this—

{—But, since I can't run away, I'll fight. That's just the kind of guy I am}

Saying this, the youth's voice was clearly shaking.

[Girl:huh?]

Not sure if she had misheard it, the girl opened her eyes and looked around her.

The owner of the voice wasn't there. But all around, she could see astounded faces just like her own.

The voice paused for a moment, as if choosing his next words.

And,

{Let me ask you again. Everyone listening to this voice, where are you now? Have you escaped into a refuge shelter? Are you hiding inside your house? Are you trembling alone? Are you with someone? Are you with the person most important to you? Or, even if you're next to an unfamiliar face, is it a face that you have grown to know over the past few hours?}

[— — — —]

{It's a pretty arbitrary request, and it may be difficult, but please don't be alone. When a person is alone, they'll just start coming up with lame ideas. I know that from experience. Trust me. So please don't be alone. Stay with

someone. And——}

Inhaling, with only a slight hesitation,

{And if you can, look at the face of the person who's with you}

[Girl: ———]

Following the youth's words, the girl's gaze slowly fell into her arm. Her little brother was looking up at her. His swaying, uncertain emerald eyes met hers.

{Whose face do you see now? Is it someone important to you, or a stranger who you've spent these past few hours with? Or maybe it's a friend.But most likely, it's a wretched face. A face that's about to cry, a face that's in distress, and I imagine it probably isn't smiling. No, perhaps there is someone out there who is putting up a strong face, forcing themselves to smile so as not to worry the people around them. If there is, then that's an amazing person. If someone you care about is smiling this way, you should be proud of them. But now, with that in mind, compare it with the smile you know}

Her brother's face was close to crying. It was a crumpled face, a face that was about to burst into tears again. While, reflected in her brother's eyes, her own face was hollow as if it had lost its expression.

{——Is this acceptable to you?}

[Girl:no way]

A small, thin voice slipped from the girl's lips. It was a weak and broken sound that was impossible even for herself to hear. Nevertheless,

{I can't accept this. I will not accept this}

The youth's voice rang, as though having heard her reply.

{I also have people I cherish. Friends I hold dear. And I cannot forgive whoever put that pained, sorrowful expression on the faces of the people I love. I don't want you to force yourself to smile. You kidding me? Quit joking around. I want to raise my voice and shout that the smile of the girl I know should be way cuter than this...}

[Boy: B-big sister.....]

{I don't want to keep losing. It'd be too pathetic to give up here. There's no

way I can allow it. They are the ones in the wrong. Even if you are too weak to do the right thing, to strike down those in the wrong, you should at least know what is right. And when you know that you are right, there is no way you can allow yourself to lose to those who are wrong. At least, I don't intend to surrender and bow to those guys}

[Girl: Fredo.....]

Hearing her little brother faintly calling her, she gently held him closer and pressed her forehead against his.

A feverish heat transferred between them. Hot, very hot, it was the heat of life.

She couldn't tell if it was her younger brother's or her own, but the heat was certainly there.

{I want to run away, but I can't run away. I want to cry, but I can't cry. The enemy is strong, but I don't want to lose. And so, I'll fight. I know I am weak, and stupid, but still I will fight. They are wrong. They are wrong to have made the people I care about look like they're about to cry. So, fight. I will fight. —And I want you all to fight}

[Girl: —hk]

Her breath clogged. Her throat suddenly closed, ashamed of her own weakness.

Surely, it was because the voice of the youth had ceased to tremble, but had become powerful, as if pointing to the road ahead.

She could understand the youth's feelings. She received the youth's message, painful and clear.

In her heart, the girl's will was the same as the youth's. She wants to fight. She wants to do all she could to drive out the thugs who had attacked their city. But, both she and her little brother were small, young, and their reach were far too short.

They were helpless, ignorant, weak, and cowardly, and so——

{Don't get me wrong. I said I want you to fight, but I'm not telling you to pick up a stick and fight them. In fact, please avoid doing anything so reckless. I don't want you to mob up and spill blood fighting against the Witch Cult. What I am asking you to fight for is to not look down}

[Girl: To not... look down.....]

{Staring at your feet isn't going change anything. Your gaze isn't going to bore a hole in the floor, and even if it does, that won't fix a thing..... So please, lift your face and look ahead}

She looked up. Not at her knees, not at her brother's blond hair, but at the shelter.

And there, she saw the faces of those around her also lifting.

Their eyes met, wide open as if in astonishment.

Just like the girl, everyone had subconsciously raised their faces, obeying the voice of the youth.

{If you look around you, surely, you'll meet someone's eyes. Like you, this is someone who is afraid and wants to run away..... but, just like you, this is also someone who doesn't want to lose. There is the person you cherish, there is the person you are looking at now, and, if you add yourself to the list, that's already three people. There should be more depending on where you are}

Just as the youth said, the people's gazes intersected as they lifted their faces. The gleams within their irises were complicated, and surely, the girl's own eyes must've been the same. However, there now seemed to be something more than just tremors of terror.

{If you can see that you are not alone, then that's enough. You are not alone. That in itself is powerful, don't you think? I don't want to see saddened expressions on the faces of people I love. And I don't want the people looking at me now to see a miserable expression in my eyes. I'm not the only one who's so vain, weak, and stubborn, am I?}

[— — — —]

That beseeching, calling voice was trying to muster the people's courage. And yet, to the girl's ears, the youth was pleading for help— for something, anything, to cling to.

And then, she realized it.
The youth's feelings had never changed since the moment this broadcast began.

While lamenting his weak, insufficient self, he did not give up. He was telling himself that that was his only weapon, and telling everyone else that they were also the same.

{Please, help me believe this. I may be weak and hopeless, but I can't give up just yet. I'm not the only coward who hates to give up..... please, help me believe it}

It was a cowardly voice. A cowardly plea. It was a voice which, when everyone needed help, was shamelessly shouting quicker and louder than anyone: *"Please help me"*——

{Or... am I the only one?}

The voice lost its confidence. Or rather. The youth's voice had no confidence to begin with.

A sense of agitation surged up. *Don't go.* Whatever it takes, she wanted to shout for him to stay.

[Girl:you're.. not]

A faint voice, indiscernible like a mosquito's cry, spilled from her throat. This voice would not reach him. The reply would have to be louder. In order to answer the voice of that coward, afraid and alone——

{Who believes..... even now, we can still fight... am I the only one?}

[Girl: ——YOU'RE NOT!]

Opening her mouth, the girl screamed at the top of her lungs. Voices resounded throughout the refuge shelter. Not just the girl's. Others who had also lifted their faces shouted out as well.

They were voices resisting against sorrow, weakness, and fear.

If that was the youth's plan all along, then they fell for it through and through. Who cares, even if it was? That wimpy trembling of his voice, that faltering pep-talk, that pitiful encouragement, and that pleading, clinging faith, even if all of it had been an act...

If they fell for such a masterful performance, who could blame them?

But, if this really was the voice of a clumsy wimp, how could anyone just leave

him be?

{I'm not, am I?}

[Girl: ——You're not!]

{You guys are still fighting, aren't you? You haven't been swallowed by weakness, have you?}

[Girl: We haven't..... we don't want to lose!]

The depths of her chest grew hot. The roots of her teeth were trembling, and a passion different from anger was raging.

That feeling wasn't the girl's alone. It was a flaring passion engulfing everyone into a single inferno.

The anxiety they had only recently shared now became a bonfire of a different emotion.

{If you are with someone important to you, hold their hand and believe in them. If you're with someone you don't know, give them a nod and assure them you'll do your best together. Because neither you nor that person have been crushed by defeat or are about to give up fighting. And as long everyone goes on fighting, I will fight to the end as well. I will fight—— I will fight, and win}

[————]

In the end, this is just a shelter far away from the City Hall.
No matter how loudly they shouted here, no matter how they scream that they are with him, none of it would reach the youth.
Still, the youth sounded relieved, as though he had heard the girl and the others' replies. He received it, he received it and proclaimed in a voice trembling in swelling emotion:

——I will fight, and win

There was no question of whether it was possible.
Only faith that surely, he will.

Just as the youth believed that the girl and the people of this city would not be beaten by despair——

The girl and the citizens believed that the youth behind that voice will prevail in the perilous battle ahead.

Why did they believe it? Because surely, this voice——

{——My name is Natsuki Subaru. I am the Spirit-Arts User who defeated Sin Archbishop Sloth of the Witch Cult}

[————!!]

An uproar erupted at the revelation of the youth's identity.

The girl didn't quite understand the significance of that declaration. But this was not the case for the people around her. The impact was overwhelming, and certainly not in the negative sense.

At first, they were startled, then, as comprehension followed—— hope and faith spread explosively as even the girl's heart was swallowed by that wave of emotion.

{My colleagues and I will do everything to take care of the Witch Cult in this city! So, please believe in us and fight on. Hold onto the hands of the people precious to you and cast away the cowering part of yourself that wants to surrender. And...}

[————]

{——Leave the rest to me!}

Deafening cheers erupted, flooding the shelter with heated enthusiasm. Expectation became hope, and, in a single breath, one hope became hope innumerable.

The girl looked down at her younger brother in her arms and saw the undeniable light dwelling in his eyes. Just to be sure, she embraced her brother tightly once more. Her brother's arms wrapped around her body in return, and, while savoring the warmth of that embrace, the girl looked up towards the ceiling.

Unable to hide his fear or apprehension, that youth nevertheless took on the hopes of every person in this city and declared that he will fight. The girl closed her eyes, sketching out the image of the hero whose face she didn't even know, and prayed for every imaginable good fortune upon him.

——Because surely, he must be just a common-place youth, fighting for the sake of someone important to him.

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Leaving the magic device shaped like a gramophone, Subaru slowly stepped back.

Nervous sweat had completely drenched his forehead. Leaning against a nearby workbench, he roughly swiped it off of his brow.

Taking deep breath after deep breath, he wondered if the device was picking up that sound.

But when he looked to Anastasia, who was in charge of operating the device beside him, it seemed she had already safely powered it off. Instantly, he was washed over with relief.

[Subaru:Hhaa, that was exhausting]

He spilled a sigh as his head churned with unimaginable fatigue. Honestly, he was in such a trance while he spoke that he could barely remember a thing he said. It wasn't that he forgot everything, but the memories were too vague in places.

And he had Anastasia's speech notes, too...

[— — — —]

Wiping off the droplets hanging down his chin with a sleeve, Subaru noticed that the room was extraordinarily quiet.

The people who had been watching the broadcast didn't say a word. Beside Anastasia, were Garfiel and Al. While Julius and Ricardo, who later joined them, were also standing in a corner of the room. To see all these usually-noisy people suddenly dead-silent couldn't be a good sign.

Unless, was his incoherent broadcast just that bad?

[Anastasia: Natsuki-kun]

[Subaru: Uwaha! I'm sorry! I'll do better next time!]

[Anastasia: Why're you apologizin'? Strange child]

With his heart wracked by anxiety, Subaru blurted out an apology the instant he heard his name. While, laughing at his reaction, Anastasia tilted her head smiling.

[Anastasia: It's a strange thing to say to a strange child, but, Natsuki-kun, did

you.....]

[Subaru: Hm?]

[Anastasia: Did you use to be a con-artist back in the day or somethin'?]

[Subaru: What's with that baseless accusation all of a sudden!? As you can see, I'm just a normal everyday student..... or actually, in a certain sense, I'm not even a student!]

[Anastasia: Ah, no no... I didn't mean that in a bad way. I was just trying to say that the way you spoke was exquisite..... how you cast them into despair only to lift them up again, simply an impeccable use of rhetoric]

Waving off Subaru's protests, Anastasia weakly giggled "*Tahhaha*". But, hearing this only made Subaru more muddled than ever.

[Subaru: Rhetoric? The hell're you talking about? I blanked out right away and didn't even know what I was saying. All the letters on the cheat-sheet got blurred together and I couldn't remember a thing after I gave up reading]

[Anastasia: Yeah, you pretty much skipped our draft. You can't imagine how I felt when right off the bat you started sayin' things that had nothin' to do with what we discussed..... but it seems I needn't have worried myself]

[Subaru: I'm very sorry about that! But, generally, wasn't it more or less in line with the notes? I mean, if it was that bad, you would've stopped me, right, Anastasia-san?]

The notes in his hand: the cheat-sheet he'd forgotten about at the most crucial moment, was filled with flowery oratory designed to clear away the anxieties of the people in this city.

It was a proud conglomeration of Anastasia's negotiation techniques, Garfiel's vast stores of proverbs, and even some of Subaru's modern knowledge of neat and witty comments.

Even though he couldn't read from it when it actually mattered, he probably had some of its ideas floating around in his head and wound up including them in his speech one way or another.

[Anastasia: I don't know how to put this, but, Natsuki-kun, your speech didn't even touch on anythin' in the notes. I mean, none at all]

[Subaru: ——Eh?]

Without leaving any ambiguity on the matter, Anastasia's words instantly shot down Subaru's speculations.

Suddenly growing rigid, Subaru looked around at the others to confirm if this is true. However, the other four only showed their respective version of awkward faces as Subaru's gaze passed over them.

Among them, Julius took one step forward. And, while picking at his front hair,

[Julius: It's just as Anastasia-sama said, Subaru. Your broadcast didn't contain any of the things we discussed beforehand. In particular, the part that was supposed to have been revealed at the start, about your accomplishment of slaying Sin Archbishop Sloth, was moved into the second half. It was almost to the point that I wanted to ask you what you were trying to do]

[Subaru: Seriously? If I didn't say that, then wasn't I just some super-random-guy to them!? If it was like that, you could've stopped me! Even if I had to start over it would've been better than confusing the hell out of them!]

[Julius: Start over? That's unthinkable]

While Subaru started flipping out at Julius' confession of doubt, Julius shook his head with an expression of complete seriousness.

Then, with almost a sense of reverence towards Subaru,

[Julius: ——It was... a wonderful speech]

[Subaru:Aah?]

[Julius: It didn't matter that you forgot the notes. With your own ability, you've accomplished something far beyond our expectations. I have nothing but praises for your achievement. This is the same sentiment which I had felt when you slew the White Whale and Sloth]

In front of a stunned Subaru, Julius only piled on his exaggerated praises. In a way that was utterly unlike Julius, Subaru thought he saw excitement in "The Most Perfect Knight"'s eyes. But the moment he regained his senses, Subaru began to suspect that something was up.

What's gotten into this Knight? Could Subaru have upset his composure that much?

[Subaru: Quit joking around... I always thought your jokes aren't very funny, you know]

[Julius: If that sounded like a joke to you, then it's only because you think far too little of yourself. But, then again, perhaps that is exactly what made your speech what it was. It was a speech no one but you could have made]

[Subaru: You really are making fun of me, aren't you?]

Considering the critical situation they were in, Julius' praises were only making Subaru more frustrated.

Subaru had already gotten used to Julius' sarcasm by now, but this wasn't the time to be pointlessly bickering like this. If the speech didn't have the effect they had hoped for, then they'd need to come up with another plan as soon as possible.

[Subaru: Instead of giving people strength, if all I did was make them distrust us, then it won't work even if I try again. Next time someone else should.....]

[Anastasia: Natsuki-kun, that's enough of your self-deprecation, you know? It's making people uncomfortable just listenin']

Saying this, Anastasia put a stop to Subaru's whining from the side. Glaring at Subaru with a look of disapproval on her adorable face,

[Anastasia: Your speech was exceptionally effective, guess I have to spell it out for you since you can't seem to realize it yourself. —Natsuki-kun, your speech was more perfect than we could've ever imagined. You have the talent of a true demagogue, you know]

[Ricardo: I'm with th'young miss y'know! *Khhhhyya*, that gave me shivers! What's with you 'n words! Y'make it look easy, bro! The way y'tricked Emilia-sama, Crusch-sama, that lil'girl 'n th'ground dragon into fallin' all over ya, m'I right!?!]

[Subaru: Both of you're saying things I can't just let slide! What d'you mean tricked! Who're you calling a demagogue!]

Listening to their overly-scandalous evaluations, Subaru raised his voice, shouting.

But Anastasia and Ricardo only innocently looked at each other and shrugged.

And here, seeing how everyone seemed to be in on it, Subaru began to suspect that they weren't entirely joking.

This grew all the more obvious when he saw Garfiel, squatting on the floor, watching him.

[Garfiel: Capt'n.....]

[Subaru: Garfiel... what do you think?]

[Garfiel: Capt'n's the Capt'n a'right. I was right t'follow ya outta th'Sanctuary..... that's what I think]

[Subaru:Your expectations are always a bit too heavy on me]

[Garfiel: Well that's yer own fault, ain't it, Capt'n]

Garfiel got up and walked over to him, flashing his fangs smiling. Seeing this, Subaru expelled a sigh through his nostrils, and,

[Subaru: In that case, running from my responsibilities would be the same as giving up, wouldn't it. I don't want that to happen... that's probably what I said in the broadcast, right?]

[Anastasia: There you go]

Anastasia smiled, watching Subaru scratching his head, looking deflated as if only just now accepting this. She pumped up her little chest at this unexpectedly good outcome and softly rubbed her scarf with her hand,

[Anastasia: In fact, you've raised everyone's morale so high that I'm gettin' worried they'll start doin' somethin' stupid. Even here, you've got us pumped full of spirit on account of Wrath's Authority, you know]

[Subaru: If you exaggerate like that I'm gonna think you're pulling my leg again..... seriously, just how good of a radio DJ was I, anyway...]

Getting hoisted up higher and higher was only making it harder to wrap his head around it.

Tearing himself away from the whirlpool of warm gazes, Subaru slowly walked up to the arcane device once more.

[Subaru: In any case, if that speech had made a difference, that's better than anything. Hopefully, this'll be enough to stave off any more violence in the

refuge shelters..... So, any thoughts on our next step?]

[Anastasia: Now that the citizens are calmed down, we've taken care of everything apart from the root cause itself. However, after Natsuki-kun's speech, the Witch Cult definitely knows about our intentions now.....]

[Subaru: Wonder what their reaction will be. Like you guys said, aside from the fact that it'll be irrational, there's not much else to go on. At the same time, we must settle this as soon as possible]

Regardless of the effectiveness of Subaru's speech, it didn't change the fact that the means to destroy this city was still held in the hands of lunatics. Even with the greatest optimism, chances were, the Great Water Gates would be released at the stroke of midnight and the city would be swallowed beneath the flood.

No matter what, they must end this before that happens.

[Anastasia: And to do this, we'll need to capture all four towers at once..... correct?]

[Subaru: There are four Sin Archbishops and two enemies we don't know about. We'll need to consult with our forces on how to tackle this]

Simultaneously capturing all four Control Towers is the necessary condition for saving this city.

Concentrating their forces like they did for assault on the City Hall wouldn't work here. Since, as soon as they attack any of the towers, there would be the risk of the other three releasing the floodgates.

Subaru wasn't confident that they could survive these odds four times in a row.

Up against six major enemies, their fighting strength was——

[Subaru: It's a... difficult hand. There's the chance it could turn into a repeat of our attack on the City Hall. But..... if we could have at least one more card]

[???: ——In that case, how about a Joker?]

While Subaru counted their forces on the fingers of his hands, a voice abruptly chimed in.

Without thinking, Subaru turned towards the figure standing at the entrance of the room, and,

[Subaru: Sounds like in the time since I last saw you, your evaluation of yourself has gone up quite a bit?]

[???: Not nearly as much as Natsuki-san, being asked to make speeches and all..... I never thought I had a hero among my friends, but guess I was wrong]

[Subaru: Still don't think it suits me, though]

Seeing the figure shoot him a mischievous smile, Subaru shrugged his shoulders and laughed. Then, walking up to the entrance, he gave that smiling figure a high-five.

Watching this reunion, Garfiel's face also brightened,

[Garfiel: Otto-bro! Yer safe, ain't ya!]

At Garfiel's delighted call, Otto, who had been missing since the troubles started, answered with a nod.

Aside from the dirt on his clothing, Otto seemed completely unhurt. Joining them, he gave the approaching Garfiel a high five as well,

[Otto: I barely escaped with my life. It's a miracle that I survived and somehow made it here alive. Glad to see you two are safe. Though, I know you guys are way harder to kill than I am, so I wasn't all that worried]

[Subaru: Is that right. Actually, I wasn't all that worried about you either. Why is that?]

[Garfiel: I dunno. That's just Otto-bro's natural-vibes maybe?]

[Otto: Can't you worry about me a little more!? In this kind of crisis, it was extremely dangerous to be out there alone, you know!?]

But, in reality, he did manage to rejoin them, so that wasn't very convincing. Anyway, while they were in the middle of this joyous reunion, Anastasia clapped her hands and squeezed herself into the conversation,

[Anastasia: Alright alright, calm down calm down. First off, it's nice to see that Otto-kun is alive. And I'm sure there're mountains of things you want to ask each other about what you've been up to and such, but...]

Cutting off her words there, Anastasia shot Otto a glare with her green-onion-colored eyes,

[Anastasia: That conspicuous remark you just made..... mind telling me what it meant?]

[Otto: The Joker, right? It's a simple story. If I let him come in right away, my survival would've been pretty much overlooked, so I cleverly asked him to wait outside for a bit]

Looking a little embarrassed, Otto walked over to the door at Anastasia's prodding and gave a signal to someone on the other side of the door. Preceded by the sound of footsteps, a new character walked into the room. And,

[?????: ——*Sorry I'm late*]

One sentence. And that utterance alone charged its listeners with the feeling of being reinforced by ten thousand men. Alongside the sensation of a gust of wind sweeping by, was the illusion of a towering flame appearing before their eyes, compelling their hearts to shudder. And in reality, this reunion did indeed hold that kind of power.

For the strength that they have been dying to obtain had arrived.

[Reinhard: *Reinhard van Astrea*—— *it's a bit late, but I've come to join you*]

Saying this, the red-flame Sword Saint announced his intention to join the fight.

Chapter 43: Before The Rendezvous

Translated by: u/fr81

[Reinhard: Forgive me for not providing assistance at this critical moment. I can only reflect on how I was lacking.]

Receiving the gazes of those present inside, Reinhard apologized. At the sight of the Sword Saint with bowed head, everyone grew silent for a moment. Speaking out harshly in response to his apology would be a simple matter. But, words of blame were easier to form than ones which conveyed true intent. In truth, that all this time they were in dire need of his power, and Reinhard had been missing with his status unknown had not changed.

At the moment City Hall was being retaken, if that same strength had been there, it was unthinkable.

So even simply negative words, did not easily emerge from anyone's lips. Only,

[Subaru: Really, you idiot. Because you weren't here, how hard do you think it was for us?]

Approaching that crimson hero, Subaru called out while shoving his chest. As that fist lightly touched him, Reinhard, with an attitude like he could not justify himself to Subaru turned his gaze away. At that scolded and crestfallen appearance unbecoming of him, Subaru snorted.

[Subaru: You know, if you're coming anyway, just show up 15 minutes earlier! Then I wouldn't have to give a speech not fitting my character at all. That's supposed to be your job.]

[Reinhard: Sorry..... However, it was a great speech fitting of you. Though many things are required of me, giving courage-rousing broadcasts of that extent is not something I could do. You were the right choice.]

[Subaru: Between me and you, the required role for that broadcast is a little different, I think.]

At that bitterly smiling Reinhard's chest, Subaru shoved once again. And, he also poked the tip of that downcast hero's nose with a finger.

[Subaru: Reinhard.]

[Reinhard: ?]

[Subaru: Since you came it's like a hundred guys did, no, a thousand. If it's just that, I can expect that much right? I'm counting on it?]

[Reinhard: ————]

It was power that rivaled the force of the tides. Subaru's hundredfold, even thousandfold evaluation was laughable.

At Subaru's expectation-filled question, Reinhard's blue eyes blinked. But that hesitation immediately faded, and Reinhard's lips formed into a smile.

[Reinhard: Aah, count on me. If you would expect that much of me, I will comply.]

[Subaru: That somehow-making-women-happy-type kind of talk, can you not stop that? What, enough..... And with that, if everyone now has something they want to say, please tell us.]

Seeing that initial discomfort disappear from Reinhard's face as he laughed, Subaru turned and looked back. Gazing over at those that until then had not said anything, he indicated Reinhard.

[Subaru: At these times, the side that gets special treatment suffers much more. Besides, a chance to scold this sword saint that wants to be scolded doesn't happen often. So as much as you want to, do it, do it.]

[———]

[Subaru: After confessing what's on our minds, let's talk.——About how to help everyone.]

Opening his heart, Subaru spoke like that.

At that attitude, the mood was of one holding their breath.

Otto and Garfiel, only those two were used to Subaru's bravado and were smiling at that.

Anyway, having one or two fellows there see through to his true intentions was

just right.

They did not have to hold in their thoughts, because it was right after he had made that kind of speech.

※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※ ※

After that, Reinhard's personal talking to (details omitted) was held, and again talk of how to recapture the city started up again.

Even saying that, other than Reinhard and Otto's thoughts agreeing, there was no clear improvement. The number of enemies that they could not avoid attacking, and the capture strategy of hitting all control towers simultaneously did not change.

[Subaru: But in the midst of this chaos, where was Reinhard and what was he up to?]

As they all sat around in a circle talking, Subaru moved to start with that question.

Reinhard's expression clouded at his words. Today, his face often grew like that.

[Subaru: You don't have Felt with you, and there's a lot of things I want to hear about. Ah, something like scolding you, this isn't like that? On that matter, with the words from just before, I am treating it like nothing happened.]

[Anastasia: What Natsuki-kun was sayin', well, 's a part that bothers me too. No way the『Sword Saint』 got scared and was hidin', I wasn't thinking anything like that. But I am wantin' to hear a convincing reason.]

At Subaru's question, Anastasia joined in. Looking carefully at Anastasia's attitude, it definitely seemed like she had been receiving reports from Julius. Right before the turmoil began, Reinhard and Felt were contacting Heinkel together, she said.

After that question from her, Reinhard's expression clouding over seemed to be proof of that assertion.

Wilhelm too, but when it came to Heinkel the Astreas' explanations were very vague. Saying that, their approach was like—,

[Subaru: Like someone stuck inside for ten years, and now is a pro-NEET child that's treated as a tumor by the aged parents.....]

[Otto: Natsuki-san is jumping to weird delusions so I'm sorry, but what will you do? If it is hard for Reinhard-san to say, then I can speak, but.]

While Subaru recalled flashes of a evening news special on Hikkikomori, Otto chimed in. His worried gaze was directed at Reinhard, and his tone held an apologetic sort of mood.

[Subaru: And you came together with Reinhard, right, but could you have been with him during the turmoil too?]

[Otto: No, there was nothing like that? I joined up with Reinhard-san at the last moment..... However, I have mostly figured out the situation.]

[Reinhard: Thank you, Otto. But this is a problem of my House. Truly, it is a difficult topic to discuss, but it would be for the best to speak of it myself.]

At Otto's consideration, Reinhard bowed his head and refused his offer. He gazed ahead, and drew his posture straight a moment later.

[Reinhard: Firstly, though I have said it many times, let me apologize once more. While being in a position that should assist from the very beginning, for many hours I could not join together to help with the situation. I deeply apologize, and take this matter seriously.]

[Julius:On that point our view is as we said just now. We cannot forgive everything like there was no problem. However, you are needed in the upcoming battle. If you seek to repent, then perform well in the fights to come.]

[Reinhard: I will do that, Julius....When the Witch Cult first broadcast, Felt-sama and I were at the 2nd Street corner being called upon. The one summoning us was Vice-Captain Heinkel.]

Reinhard, who had started speaking, called Heinkel "Vice-Captain" in a stiff voice.

It was widely known that they were father and son. Even with that, calling his father by title, it was plenty to bring about the realization that the relationship between the two was not just a simple father-son relationship.

[Subaru: After that fighting and separation from before, Felt obeyed a summons from him?]

[Reinhard: Felt-sama too, in her heart would have wanted to refuse. However, the talk was regarding a matter under the authority of Astrea's Lord, so the option of rejection did not exist. What request would be made was unknown to us.....Felt-sama accompanying me, we headed towards the appointed place.]

[Subaru: How did the talk there become decided.....]

[Reinhard: My apologies, but as that matter is directly related to and regarding the Royal Selection. I would appreciate being allowed not to elaborate. It is enough to say, the talk did not go smoothly.]

Reinhard tone of voice was falling, and it was easy to figure out the talk had gone poorly.

Even if it wasn't like that, Felt lacked experience dealing with negative emotions.

Taking Heinkel's despicable nature into account, it was not difficult to imagine how the talk would have played out.

In the midst of such conversation—,

[Reinhard: Then, the Witch Cult's first broadcast happened. While we could hardly believe our ears, it was clear we needed to move immediately. If there was a truly dire situation. it was my intention to head out right away. The other retainers, they also had a method to call for me if needed prepared beforehand.]

That method was, to launch magic into the sky at any time. It would be the signal.

When Sirius appeared, if Latius fired off the signal Reinhard always ran to the scene within 30 seconds. What he said was true.

However, Reinhard had heard the Witch Cult's so-called broadcast and its clear malice yet still did not move. He did not come running to the scene, and not just that, for several hours later he had kept silent.

That was so.. Why the hell?

[Subaru: The broadcast, that it claimed to be sent from City Hall, you would have known that too. At that point, you would have had the option to run to City Hall.Then why, didn't you come?]

[Reinhard: ————]

It was not that he was scolding him. That was not the intent, but his voice was hard as he pressed for answers.

There were more than a few things that occurred to him. If before that hard-fought City Hall recapture, Reinhard's presence had arrived there.—Even now, Crusch who was fighting her suffering would not have been harmed. It might even have ended without Subaru's right leg suffering its strange accident. Though it was not intentional, the gazes growing harsh here were not just Subaru's.

Receiving the stares of everyone in the room, Reinhard, who had until then been speaking fluently closed his mouth, and lowered his gaze once again. With long lashes and shining eyes, in front of that he was hesitant to speak any words.

Even so, after those few conflicted seconds slowly passed, the hero's stopped words started again.

[Reinhard: ——Vice-Captain Heinkel had, taken Felt-sama as a hostage.]

[.....]

[Reinhard: That is my, irreversible failure. Felt-sama was grabbed, and a sword was held against her neck to stop my movements. And so, I could not act.]

Speaking those words, Subaru clearly understood why Reinhard had struggled with it so much.

The mistress he should give his all for, by none other than his father's hands had been taken captive.

Humiliated and shamed, just how much had Reinhard mentally blamed himself?

[Subaru:Che, what's that? That, Vice-Captain, is he a pawn of the Witch Cult or something?]

Receiving a shocking confession, Subaru while considering Reinhard's feelings was muttering to himself. Was that, a truth too cruel. The Witch Cult was hidden here and there, so who could know who was a cultist, that he had heard. But to appear among family like that was something he did not even want to think about. Besides Petelgeuse, after seeing the reality of the other Sin

Archbishops, he now thought that even more strongly. Because the Witch Cultists were all, the lowest of the low, mere human trash.

[Reinhard: ——If it was like that, how would I react. My feelings, how might they be..]

[Subaru: What?]

However, at Subaru's offered conclusion—Of those present, about half seemed convinced, and Reinhard with a somewhere catching voice responded. That attitude of his, Subaru wondered at it. However, the other half, made up of Anastasia, Julius, and Otto, were making expressions that said they had come to another conclusion.

[Reinhard: The Vice-Captain, is not a member of the Witch Cult.At least in his remarks after seizing Felt-sama, I saw nothing that suggested that.]

[Subaru: Then what is it, is he some kind of idiot? No, even if he isn't stupid it is fine..... Then, why? Why take Felt hostage? Doing something like that, what point—]

Is there, Subaru was about to say when he realized.

The depressed look on Reinhard's face and the pitying one on Otto. Seeing those, the conclusion he drew almost made him want to laugh. He could not smile at that. There was no way to save it. If you say that, Heinkel's actions,

[Subaru: It wasn't, just because he wanted to keep you there?]

[— — — —]

[Subaru: From the Witch Cult broadcast, he realized the city was dangerous.....So, to quickly get himself safe and protected, he just want to dearly hold onto the strongest guy there?]

[Reinhard:The Vice-Captain was saying.. Your precious mistress and father are both here. Will you abandon them to save some bastards whose faces you don't even know?]

[Subaru: Your own father sprouted that bullshit!]

Subaru struck the floor with his fist.

All day today, in the repeating morning he had met this anger face-to-face. But no way, he had never imagined feeling this furious about an opponent completely unrelated to the Witch Cult.

[Reinhard: I had no words to reply with. Of course, Felt-sama was saying it was all a bluff. Since she would be fine, go rescue the others.— —But remaining there even then, was my decision. The blame indeed lies with myself.]

[Subaru: How does it go there! Whose fault it is, it's obvious to everyone here who that is!]

[Reinhard: Even so, the choice was mine.]

At the shouting Subaru, Reinhard would not concede his share of the blame. That obstinate Reinhard, he probably wouldn't bend on that no matter what anyone said. Subaru furiously held his tongue, and forced his violent feelings to calm down.

[Reinhard: Nevertheless, in that way I became trapped in a stalemate. What happened after is nothing remarkable. Even after further broadcasts I was left unable to act.....I merely received severe scoldings from Felt-sama.]

[Anastasia: But she's not with you, is Felt-chan doin' alright?]

Anastasia asked the wryly smiling Reinhard. That girl who was feeling up her shawl while making a hard-to-read blank look, showed concern for Felt's state as she had not joined them.

[Anastasia: Bein' held hostage like that for hours would be quite tiring mentally. Now that Reinhard-kun is here like this doin' this, I'm thinkin' the issue has probably been all sorted out though.]

[Reinhard: Yes, that is the case. Felt-sama is now joined with her retainers at a shelter. The Vice-Captain has been arrested and Felt-sama is watching over him.]

[Subaru: Arrested.....He was caught, huh.]

[Reinhard: That much I happily accepted. But without Otto's cooperation, even that could hardly have been achieved, I think.]

[Subaru: Otto's name shows up here, huh.]

At the Otto who had not shown signs of appearing until now, Subaru furrowed his brows. Otto was, now at his turn lightly clearing his throat to call for attention.

[Otto: The matter was like that. Even saying so, how I arrived at that scene was the result of coinciding chance and coincidence. Simply since I was aware of the relationship between the three, by happening upon the scene I could roughly come to understand the situation.]

The Astreas' family problems and the situation with Felt's royal candidacy. Knowing that much already, he had spotted Heinkel holding Reinhard in place with Felt as a hostage. Even if your brain had bad circulation, you could still figure out what the situation was with that.

[Otto: I, too, understood that being unable to borrow Reinhard's power in the fight against the Witch Cult was the worst-case scenario. At the same time I grew pale, and thought of how I could help.]

[Subaru: And so Otto somehow drew attention to himself, and somehow Felt was freed. That was how Reinhard was able to move, and now he managed to reach us.....Like that, is that right?]

[Reinhard: Luckily, Natsuki-san's big speech happened too, so the meetup point was decided without any worry. It would have been nice if we could have moved a little faster, but I had much going on as well.]

Though it was short, at Otto's contribution Reinhard nodded as well. Again, while people are not looking secretly acting well, it is the shadowy savior Otto.

[Garfiel: But still, jus' how has things with Otto-bro been up to now? Honestly walkin' around the city with Otto-bro's strength, it's fine t'see that as actin' suicidal.]

[Otto: About that, there were a lot of twists and turns.....No, I will talk about it.]

Clearing his throat, Otto indicated the outside of the City Hall building.

[Otto: As scheduled for the morning, I left for the Muse Company alone. To request of Kiritaka-san the resuming of negotiations. That side had also cooled

their head after one night passed, and it seemed a promise of further negotiations could be obtained without much issue.....]

[Subaru: It seemed, but?]

At the moment he stopped talking and paused, the Witch Cult would have started their broadcast, Subaru guessed.

However, Otto resumed speaking while shaking his head.

[Otto: At the location of the Muse Company, the 3rd Street plaza, the Witch Cult.....A Sin Archbishop made an appearance. That figure created an uproar, so the Witch Cult attack was discovered.]

[Subaru: An Archbishop.....! Before the broadcast?]

[Otto: Yes. Indeed, before the broadcast.]

Otto confirmed for the surprised Subaru, who was leaning forward. But, if you thought about it, that was not impossible. If one were to speak of Sin Archbishops acting before the broadcast, Sirius and Regulus were included too. Other than Capella who was then attacking City Hall, those Archbishops with free time in Pristella would have been doing something, the likelihood was high—,

[Subaru: Wait, Otto.]

[— — — —]

At the Subaru whose tone of voice had lowered, Otto's gaze had a grim light. That worried attitude of his, it confirmed the thoughts appearing in Subaru's imagination.

Sirius and Regulus were both encountering Subaru at the time and so could not be there. Capella too would have been participating in the attack on City Hall. Saying that, the Archbishop appearing before Otto could only be one.

[Subaru: The one you met by chance, could it be the Archbishop of『Gluttony』?]

[Otto:Yes. He was claiming to be such. There is no specific reason to lie about it, so I think it is the truth. At the plaza, introducing himself as the Sin Archbishop of Gluttony, he still appeared to be a child.]

Otto's testimony, matched up with what Subaru had seen of Roy Alphon. The selection standard for Archbishops, it was not that he wanted to know anything about that, but『Gluttony』was at least outwardly a child. A rag-draped, dirty looking child. In words as well as attitude he seemed just like a kid.

[Otto: At first, unsure if it was an abandoned child someone called them while drawing closer. Since he was standing guard near the Muse Company, I think it was one of the『White Dragon's Scales』. That person was, the first to succumb to『Gluttony』. Literally, I became unable to move.]

[.....]

[Otto: Just like that, a person is simply done in, even if it seemed unreal you could not help but believe it. Immediately, more『White Dragon's Scales』all moved to surround him, but it did not come to a happy end.]

With a face growing blue, Otto quietly spoke of that wretched spectacle.『Gluttony』, as if he was dancing, simply cut through the mercenaries in order. What was even scarier was, the keen nose of『Gluttony』—It was a sense of smell which never lost track of his prey.

[Otto: Because it was that situation, without worrying about who was first, they all tried to run away. However, that guy did not allow that. What he did, I in truth do not know. But even faraway people definitely had attacks from『Gluttony』reach them. Even inside buildings, it was the same.]

[Subaru: What, was he after?]

After absentmindedly asking, Subaru realized it was a meaningless question. The acts of the Witch Cult, the motives of those guys had nothing like certainty. Actually, Otto turned his head instead of replying.

[Otto: Let's see, what could it have been.. But anyway, it became a dire situation. Even those trying to flee from that spot, the moment their back was shown they might be attacked. There were few there but it was a complete dead end..... If Kiritaka-san was not there, I think I too could not have made it here.]

[Subaru: Kiritika, how did he do that?]

[Otto: To begin with, it seems he was a careful person. In the president's

office of the Muse Company, there was an underground concealed passage in the building connected to the channel. I escaped from out there using a small boat. While running away, I saw Kiritaka-san's back being cut open.]

[— — — —]

[Otto: From the 3rd street, I disorderly ran away is what I am saying. After that, the Witch Cult broadcast happened and it became impossible to walk around in the city carelessly, nevertheless I cautiously moved around the area. Then that happened, and we barely managed to meet, the scene described just before.]

In other words, by “the scene” he means the one where he found Reinhard stuck.

As the story linked up that far, at the same moment Subaru understood that Otto had gone through suffering, and had again by any means managed to survive.

But, in what was said just now, weighing on his thoughts,

[Subaru: Why did Kiritika go that far? If it was like you said, he even sacrificed his own body to aid in Otto's escape. That was how it sounded like to me.]

[Otto:Yes, indeed. Kiritika-san, by sacrificing himself let me escape. At the end, him being slashed, was because he pushed me to the floor and covered me with his body.]

[Subaru: Why go so far.....]

Inside Subaru, his mental picture of Kiritika was almost nonexistent. Even the slight image he had was, of his face going red, him screaming, throwing the magic stones while shaking, it was that situation only. Of course, that this was all there was to the man was not what he had assumed.

But to sacrifice his body trying to save a stranger. That level of strength, in the end he had not seen in him.

[Otto: Since I was a customer invited to his shop, he might have held something like a trader's pride. But definitely, it would seem he had a better reason for himself as well. One a little, easier to understand.]

[Subaru: Easier to understand, you say]

[Otto: Did you not realize? It's Natsuki-san.]

To the confused Subaru, Otto firmly asserted as he gave that reply. When his name appeared abruptly, Subaru was shaken. At that Subaru's reaction, Otto closed his eyes for a while,

[Otto: Looking on the existence known as the Archbishop of Sin, and seeing his own subordinates fall, Kiritaka-san must have had something faint left in his inner thoughts. Just, he must have held onto some sense of duty, I think. Then the one that became his hope was, you, Natsuki-san.]

[.....]

[Otto: After the happenings of the day before, Kiritaka-san already knew about Natsuki-san remaining here. And definitely about your achievement of vanquishing『Sloth』as well. If so, then naturally that would flow into hope. Putting saving me first over all else, it must be because he expected me to join with Natsuki-san as a partner.]

Otto's explanation fit perfectly, and it slammed into Subaru's chest with a thud.

But that nevertheless, was an unreasonable story.

With his head, he knew. To go on, to carry that, it was true, he had decided that already.

But, is it that again. Was everyone expecting that from Subaru?

Just a small, hopeless, and useless person, were they really trusting the fate of the city to someone like that?

[Otto: Natsuki-san, please do not misunderstand?]

Unknowingly forming a cynical smile, Subaru was pulled back by a voice. Otto looked straight ahead, as if gazing into Subaru. He spoke to that stiffening Subaru's expression while shrugging,

[Otto: Kiritaka-san too, in his head would have thought of various angles, regarding his role and responsibility to the city. That Natsuki-san too is hesitating about bearing the fate of the city, I am aware. But, definitely, what Kiritaka-san entrusted Natsuki-san with is a slightly simpler matter.]

[Subaru:What?]

[Otto: It is obvious. Somewhere in this city is, the woman Kiritika-san loves. Before wishing for the safety of the city, what he would have hoped for most from Natsuki-san, was for his loved one to be safe.]

[— — — —]

[Otto: Because when he pushed me onto the floor, that is what he said.]

In short, Otto wanted to tell Subaru, you struggle too much. Having taken up the fate of the city just because he felt like it and now worried about that, watching that Subaru now struggling under that weight, he could not help but speak those words.

And that over everything else, stabbed at the tough-acting Subaru's heart strongly.

His face growing hot, Subaru felt ashamed of himself.

What is this city's fate, what is all this of hopes and expectations, how ridiculously stupid.

The city, which would find itself in disaster if it was not lifted up and saved, that was just what he was seeing.

A something, which if Subaru failed to protect then it wouldn't do, it was not like those outwardly obvious and hard words. Making up the city was a person, a single person. Just one, and then another.. It was those lives that mattered. And each of those lives in turn had another precious to them, and it was just a matter of saving those connections.

[Otto: To think of it not as bearing a single large entity, but instead as lifting many small parts of the whole on your back, does that ease your feelings a bit?]

Otto's assistant power was just too high, Subaru really could only give into to him.

That Subaru's face which had only been lowered before turned upwards, and at that result Otto seemed satisfied.

[Anastasia: What's that, isn't it a nice relationship? Lookin' at it even makes me a little jealous.]

Sensing a pause in their chat, Anastasia threw out a joke like that. Sitting around, having almost gazed face-to-face as they talked, Subaru and Otto there

reflected on themselves.

And then gazing again at all of them, Anastasia tilted her head.

[Anastasia: Even sayin' so, based on what you said.....The Muse Company is finished..]

[Otto: We cannot know for sure, that is the truth. I only saw up to Kiritaka-san being slashed, but whether that wound was life-threatening..]

[Julius: That『Gluttony』's motives, is thinking about it a waste of time? To me, no matter what, the idea that he caused that disturbance for no reason is unthinkable.]

The one who had spoken was Julius, making a disgusted face. That assertive tone of voice stuck in one's mind.

[Subaru: Don't just get weird like that. Is there, some piece of evidence for that?]

[Julius:No, that there is some clear basis for it, I cannot claim. It is merely my impression from crossing swords with him at City Hall. That one, to write him off merely as a simple hedonist is mistaken, I believe.]

In that, Subaru was also in agreement. He was not simply a hedonist, he was a malicious hedonist.

But that impression, was it not a different answer than what Julius was assuming..

[Subaru: According to the broadcast, wasn't『Gluttony』's request about an artificial spirit? Maybe, there is a chance he had gone to find it?]

[Reinhard: If it is indeed a possibility. However, the more pressing question is, first, should we not suspect whether the being known as an『Artificial Spirit』even exists? Truly, is there even such a thing?]

While Subaru voiced the motivation that came to mind, Reinhard joined in. His question, many others that had heard the broadcast's demands must have had as well.

The answer to it, in this place only Subaru and Anastasia knew.

Without meaning to, Subaru peeked at Anastasia's face, but her expression was unchanged, as expected of her experience. She had no intention of being

discovered, is that what she was saying?

[Otto: ——Sorry, just one thing.]

In front of Subaru, who was wavering in his judgement, Otto was again requesting attention.

That guy, with a touch of anxiety held in his face, let out a sigh mixed with resignation.

And,

[Otto: On the matter of the artificial spirit, it is also difficult for me to know. But regarding another request, about the『Book of Wisdom』from the contents of 『Wrath』's.]

Cutting off his words there, after a moment of hesitation Otto spoke.

[Otto: My apologizes. ——It was I that brought it into this city.]

Chapter 44: Nothing Left Unsaid

Otto raised his hand and dropped that bombshell, plunging everyone in the room into a state of shock.

The unverified existence of the “Book of Wisdom” was just confirmed, not by anyone else but by one of their own. It was only natural that they’d be shocked—— with Subaru being the most shocked of them all.

"Subaru: Wh-why would you have the Book of Wisdom?"

"Otto: Before you misunderstand, let me explain. I was indeed the one who brought the so-called Book of Wisdom into the city, but the book isn't mine. I was pretty shocked when I heard the Witch Cult's request as well"

"Anastasia: *“So-called”*? That's a curious way to put it. What do you mean?"

As Otto's answered the shaken Subaru, Anastasia picked up on that descriptor and asked. At that, Otto looked around at the others, and,

"Otto: You guys all know about the Book of Wisdom, right? Simply put, it's like the Gospels... those suspicious-looking books of prophecy that the Witch Cultists have..... except it seems to be the original. I heard that the difference in accuracy is huge"

"Anastasia: The Gospel's original...? It might be a stretch, but that reminds me of the prophecies of the Dragon Annal Stone. Though of course, their credibility, reputation, and standpoints are nowhere near the same"

"Otto: I've never seen the Dragon Annal Stone and the Gospel's prophecies in action so I can't say anything about their reliability..... and the same goes for the Book of Wisdom, I'm afraid. By the time I got my hands on it, the book was already nothing more than mostly-burned remains"

"Subaru: Burned remains....."

Otto's description matched the fates of both volumes of the Book of Wisdom in Subaru's mind.

One belonged to Beatrice, and was lost in the flames of the burning Forbidden Library. The other belonged to Roswaal, and, according to Ram, was lost in the

burning Sanctuary.

It was hard to say how much of its creator, Echidona's testimony could be trusted, but if her words were to be believed—— then both volumes should have been burned.

In that case, what Otto obtained must be its charred remains.

"Anastasia: I see. I think I know why Otto-kun brought the book into Priestella now. It's to seek the help of Restoration Master Dartz, isn't it?"

"Otto:That's correct"

With that simple reply, Otto nodded to Anastasia's conclusion. Though both Julius and Reinhard appeared to accept this with an air of understanding, Subaru seemed confused by the term he had never heard before.

"Subaru: Hey don't all suddenly go *"Ahh"* and leave me out of the loop here. What's a Restoration Master?"

"Anastasia: Just as the name implies, they are Light Magic specialists who can restore objects to their original forms. Dartz, who lives in this city, is quite a famous member of their circle. Even books that are more than half damaged can be restored with pretty good results, if given enough time"

"Otto: I managed to make contact with Master Dartz and give him the remains of the Book of Wisdom. So the book should be in his workshop at the moment"

With Otto's testimony, the Book of Wisdom's whereabouts has finally been revealed.

"Garfiel: But then, when did Otto-bro meet that guy?"

"Otto: Yesterday, after the negotiations with Muse Company fell apart. Once everyone went their separate ways, I paid a visit to Master Dartz. We had a chat in private, and he seemed pretty enthusiastic about taking on the job....."

Subaru could just imagine Otto going pale in the face when he heard "Book of Wisdom" come up during the upheavals today.

That explains how the burned Book of Wisdom survived and why it was brought to this city, but Otto's motives were still unknown. Just why would he want to restore the Book of Wisdom?

Honestly, Subaru had no good impressions for the Book of Wisdom. It was an ominous book not only associated with its creator, Echidona, but with the Gospels in the hands of the Witch Cult. It was the reason Beatrice was bound in the Forbidden Library for four hundred years, and the reason Roswaal's plots wrought violence upon the Sanctuary. The truth is, Subaru was relieved when he heard that the books were destroyed.

"Otto: I won't go into the details of how I acquired it or why it's here to be restored. I only intended to clarify the Book of Wisdom's existence and its current location. Anything beyond that is an internal matter within our faction"

"Julius: But now we have the Witch Cult listing the Book of Wisdom as one of their demands. Whose responsibility do you think that is?"

"Otto: I don't think anything the Witch Cult does can be blamed on anyone other than the Witch Cult. But if you insist on it, I'll have to make some unfriendly remarks of my own"

Otto stood his ground in front of Julius' protests. And, seeing Otto turn his gaze to Anastasia, Julius quickly shook his head.

"Julius: My apologies. I said something useless just now. Naturally, I have no intention of laying the blame on you. The Witch Cult's crimes will be properly repaid when we exact punishment upon them"

"Otto: Agreed"

Otto nodded to Julius' determined words while stealing a glance at Subaru. But, seeing that secret gaze, Subaru couldn't say a word.

What was Otto thinking? Even if Subaru had no intention of suspecting him, he still had no idea what he was up to. Seeing Subaru like this, Otto quietly moved his lips,

{Otto: Let's talk later}

The message got through.
He'll explain everything, then. In that case, they better put the matter on hold for now.

"Reinhard: Now that the Book of Wisdom's existence has been confirmed, we

can't be so sure that the part about Artificial Spirits is just delusional ramblings"

With that settled, Reinhard started off with the new topic.

Though it was only going with the flow of things, now that Otto has already revealed something potentially disadvantageous to himself, there was no reason for Subaru to continue withholding his.

"Subaru: Anastasia-san"

"Anastasia: I know I know. Well, this won't be easy"

Seeing Subaru seeking her consent, Anastasia took off the scarf around her neck. She spread it out on the table, while everyone else tilted their heads at her determined expression.

But, what she did next turned all their tilted heads straight.

"Anastasia: ——No need to play possum anymore, Echidona. You can speak up now"

"Scarf-fox: In *my* case, rather than "*playing possum*", wouldn't "*playing fox*" be more appropriate, Ana?"

"——!"

Following Anastasia's call, the white fox scarf stretched out its limbs with a will of its own. Seeing this, the same expressions of shock washed over Julius and Ricardo's faces.

It seems Anastasia had hidden Artificial Spirit Echidona's existence even from the members of her own faction.

"Ricardo: Hey Miss... I dunno that thing. The hell is that thing....."

"Anastasia: Sorry for hidin' it from you, Ricardo. Julius too. ——This child would be the Artificial Spirit we're talkin' about. Her name's Echidona, and she's been my partner in crime for a long, long time"

"Scarf-fox: Hey Ricardo. It'd be pretty awkward to introduce myself like we've just met when I've technically known you for ages. We can be all buddy-buddy just like usual if you want"

Echidona was exceptionally friendly to a Ricardo who looked like he was looking at something creepy. And, as off-put as Ricardo was by the white fox's

attitude, Julius' face looked even more shocked.

Faced with the secret his master had hidden from him, his pupils were wavering with a rare and unconcealable dismay,

"Julius:then that means, Anastasia-sama is also a Spirits-Arts User?"

"Anastasia: Nnnn~ not exactly. There is no Spiritual Contract between me and Echidona. I just don't have the knack for it. And also, unlike ordinary spirits, Echidona can't fight at all"

"Scarf-fox: That's right, I'm as incompetent as it gets. I'm afraid I might even be the weakest spirit there is. So weak that even the Spirit-Knight couldn't sense my presence"

"Julius: Is that, so..... no, but then....."

Julius' suspicions were dismissed by Anastasia and Echidona in turn. But, rather than being assured, he turned his gaze toward Subaru, who was standing at the sidelines.

There was a certain sharpness in the yellow gaze he directed at Subaru.

"Julius: Why does Subaru look like he already knows? When I... as your Knight... didn't know, how could he..."

"Anastasia: It's not like that. It's..."

"Subaru: It's because she's an Artificial Spirit, just like my partner, Beatrice. After we heard the Witch Cult's demands, Anastasia-san explained it to me. So I only found out really recently, not much different from you"

"Julius: She's an Artificial Spirit.....? Anastasia-sama, is this true?"

Cutting Anastasia off, Subaru explained to the stupefied Julius. Seeing Anastasia nod to his question, Julius muttered "Is that so..." and briefly closed his eyes as if to take it all in before exhaling a deep sigh.

"Julius: I'm sorry I interrupted you. Please forgive me for any displeasure I might have caused you, Anastasia-sama. I am deeply ashamed"

"Anastasia: I've no right to chastise you when I've been keepin' it secret all this time. I should be askin' your forgiveness instead"

Julius gave Subaru a nod and apologized to Anastasia. But, seeing Julius'

apology from the side, Ricardo grabbed Echidona off of the table.

"Ricardo: Still, that's really mean, Miss! How long have we known each other? Why'd ya keep somethin' like that from me? I'm kinda hurt! Is that all we are to each other?"

"Scarf-fox: I'd appreciate if you don't handle me so roughly. Even in this form, I'm still quite finicky about my hair. And we wouldn't want to damage Ana's adorable appearance, now would we?"

"Ricardo: Pretty glib-tongued, ain't ya. Ugh, nevermind. I'll let it go this time"

After pulling and squishing it to his heart's content, Ricardo seemed satisfied and let the white fox go. Landing on the table, the white fox quickly scuttled over to Anastasia, wrapped around her neck, and became inanimate once more.

Having resided there for long, it was impressive how quickly it could return to its lifeless state.

"Anastasia: And so, the Artificial Spirits exist as well.That said, just like Otto-kun's Book of Wisdom, I've no intention of handing this child over to the Witch Cult"

"Subaru: Sorry for keeping it secret. But, it's the same with me. Beako is my partner. I won't even let her hold hands with those lunatics"

Anastasia and Subaru both asserted their decision to refuse the Witch Cult's demands.

Hearing this, Reinhard nodded, and,

"Reinhard: I know. Of course. We cannot accept a single one of their demands. Although, perhaps the one about wedding their bride could be overlooked"

"Subaru: Absolutely not! Because the bride those assholes are talking about is Emilia!"

"Otto: Pff!? Emilia-sama's been taken!? And here I was wondering why I haven't seen her around, so she's in trouble!? Couldn't you have brought it up sooner!?"

Reinhard widened his eyes, and the shocking news sent Otto's eyes spinning. Subaru clenched his teeth in front of those two's reactions and continued with "Sorry...",

"Subaru: It was all my fault, I watched her get taken away. But, since they're talking about a wedding, they shouldn't have done anything to hurt her. So we have to go over there, kill them, and bring her back. Absolutely, absolutely..."

"Reinhard: —Yes, we will. We absolutely cannot allow this"

Just the thought of Regulus sent rage boiling within Subaru's mind, and, in support of that indignation, Reinhard burnished his intent to fight. It was an aura so dependable that it was terrifying. Without a doubt, his presence was tremendously reassuring.

And, at this thought, Subaru turned his gaze to the corner of the room—— toward the man who had stayed out of the conversation thus far. Sitting there, leaning against the wall, his expression was hidden behind his helmet.

"Subaru: Hey, Al. You should join the conversation too. You haven't said a word since the end of the speech. Our most lethal weapon got held up all because of that guy you brought. You better do something to make up for that, you know"

Walking over, Subaru called to the downcast Al. And, sighing at the lack of a reaction, Subaru brought up Reinhard's father—— Heinkel.

Heinkel had taken Felt hostage and effectively pinned Reinhard in place. This clear-cut betrayal by turning a weapon on a Royal Selection candidate was not only a crime of lese-majesty, but fell nothing short of treason. Normally, there's no way an offender could escape the death sentence after committing such a heinous crime, but just how will Reinhard handle this? At least, Subaru couldn't glean it from the side of Reinhard's face.

"Al: ——I'm sorry, but I'm out"

"Subaru:hah?"

Perhaps distracted with his thoughts on Reinhard, Subaru didn't react until Al

had already stood up. Taking his back off of the wall, Al looked like he was about to walk right past Subaru. Realizing this, Subaru quickly grabbed Al's shoulder, turning him around.

"Subaru: W-wait! You're out? What're you talking about? We need every fighter we can get right now, and you want to leave us? What're you, crazy?"

"Al: Crazy or whatever, you'd be crazy to count me as a fighter to begin with. Any random guy you pull from the shelters who's been in a fight'll be better than me. So it doesn't matter if I go"

"Subaru: The hell is that! Don't give me that moody bullshit! What's going on all of a sudden? If you got something to say, say it!"

"Al: ——*You're the only person I don't wanna hear that from, bro*"

Shaking off Subaru's arm, Al's penetrating glare pierced into Subaru from inside his helmet.

That indiscernible gaze and uncharacteristic tone sent a chill crawling up Subaru's back.

It was unlike hostility or murderous intent, but a fiery emotion all the same. Subaru felt as if he had seen that inexplicable emotion from somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where or what it was.

And he went without understanding as they continued their standoff, when——

"???: My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: ——*Your gaze makes heat swell in my chest~*"

"Subaru: Shut up!!"

"???: Pyiichi!?"

Subaru reflexively lashed back at the happy-go-lucky voice that came out of nowhere. The target jumped at that shout and tumbled flamboyantly over the table behind her.

Rolling around, moaning and wailing, it was a girl with auburn skin——

"Subaru: You're... Lilianna!?"

"Lilianna: Uugyaouu! My elbow! My knee! Every bone that can be called a bone in my body is shattered! All six of my ribs are broken! There's no mistake

about it!"

The one energetically rolling on the floor in front of Subaru was the Bard, Lilianna.

Seeing her the same as ever, Subaru didn't even bother pointing out that humans had more than six ribs but only patted his chest in relief.

"Subaru: I was pretty worried after we got separated, but I'm glad to see you safe. That's a relief"

"Lilianna: Safe!? Can't you see I'm on the verge of death here!? How can you pat your chest in relief in front of a damsel in distress, what kind of sick humor is that!? My inspiration is flashing! Listen if you please: — *Fingers! Ears! And eyes~!*"

"Subaru: You're still pretty lively, aren't you?"

Sitting up cross-legged on the floor, she strummed her Lullyleigh, suddenly a picture of health. Although the abruptness of her recovery was rather unsettling, Subaru was just glad that she was alright.

"Subaru: But, how did you get to the City Hall? It must've been dangerous wandering around outside....."

"????: *Naturally, isn't that for me to decide? Commoner*"

"Subaru: Gh"

Before he could ask Lilianna how she got here safely, an arrogant voice answered the question in her place.

With the ringing of high-heeled footsteps, a woman in resplendent red stepped into the meeting room. Adorned in rouge from head to toe, she swept her blood-red eyes across the room.

"Priscilla: Looks like all the actors are gathered. It was good of you rabble to have gotten ready for the star to arrive. Be sure to keep it up in the future"

Smiling in a good mood holding a spread fan over her lips—— it was Priscilla. Her sudden entrance surprised everyone including Subaru, but the first to react was none other than her servant, Al.

"Al: P-Princess-san! So you're alright... I was worried when I couldn't find you"

"Priscilla: Mm, is that Al? What is the meaning of you dallying with these peasants instead of serving me? Is it not your duty to look upon my figure, listen to my voice, inhale my scent, and obey my commands? And Schult, making me have to look for him myself, there should be a limit to your insolence"

"?????: P-please forgive me, Priscilla-sama....."

While Priscilla mercilessly berated her worried servant, a little boy in butler's uniform peeked out his head from behind her, timidly clinging to her dress. It seems that Priscilla not only saved Lilianna but her butler as well while strutting around a city overrun by the Witch Cult.

"Subaru: What kind of crazy audacity is that....."

Subaru spilled a sigh at the fine line between exceeding bravery and recklessness. Hearing this, Priscilla turned her glare to Subaru. Snapping close her fan, she briskly walked over to him, and,

"Priscilla: You there, don't move"

"Subaru: ——hk"

With a swoosh of wind, she held the tip of her fan to Subaru's throat. As usual, moving with inconceivable speed, she reached him before his eyes could even register her motion. But, since Reinhard did not intervene, Subaru figured he was in no actual danger.

"Subaru: What're you doing? We're having an important conversation here, we don't have time for....."

"Priscilla: Good. ——So that clumsy broadcast earlier was your voice, then?"

"Subaru:Yeah, what about it?"

As pathetic as it was to rely on Reinhard's lack of movement as his indicator, Subaru chose to huff back at the huffing Priscilla. At that response, she narrowed her eyes,

"Priscilla: Decidedly, I will not tolerate anyone getting more attention than myself. So, I'll prove how obviously superior I am to the likes of you"

"Subaru: Huh? Ow!?"

Flicking up the fan at Subaru's neck, it snapped against his chin so hard that tears came pouring out his eyes. With this, Priscilla left him, and imperiously sat herself down in one of the seats at the round table.

"Priscilla: Such a worthless chair. I can tell how cheap it is just by sitting on it"

Making that scalding remark about the quality of the furniture, she swept her gaze across the faces seated at the table. Then, opening her red-painted lips, a splendidly gruesome smile rose on her face.

"Priscilla: Come now, I will allow you to tell me everything about the current situation. Be good slaves and fulfill your responsibilities to your utmost. As reward, I will lend you my help. Remember to be grateful"

"Al: Wait, Princess-san! Now that we've found each other, there's no reason to stay here, right? We should get out of this dangerous place and....."

"Priscilla: Are you suggesting I run away, Al? If so, then you are gravely mistaken"

Seeing Priscilla reclining into her seat as if intending to participate in the conference, Al hurriedly protested. But Priscilla shot back a glare, instantly freezing Al inside his metal helmet.

"Priscilla: Are you listening? I am the one who decided to stay in this city. And I will be the one to decide whether to leave it. I do not accept instructions from anyone. Besides, you want me to turn my back on these rabid fools and shamelessly run away? Who do you take me for?"

"Al:"

"Priscilla: Everything in this world works in my favor. So why should I leave and allow this obnoxious mess to continue? If you wish to call yourself my servant, then know this, Al. I am favored by divine providence, and thus, my actions are divine providence"

Priscilla's will could not be swayed.

Everyone present, most of all Al, knew this. Seeing Al slump his single shoulder, the young butler—— Schult, quietly snuggled against him. And, wryly smiling at

his consoling gesture, Al made up his mind as well.

"Subaru: Otto, you have a minute?"

"Otto: Yeah, let's go"

As the round table began briefing Priscilla on the current situation, Subaru whispered to Otto. Apparently having anticipated this, Otto complied without a hint of surprise.

"Subaru: Garfiel, let me know when they're done"

Leaving this instruction behind, Subaru left the meeting room with Otto. And as soon as they were outside, they turned and faced each other in the hallway. Meeting Subaru's gaze, there was no confusion in Otto eyes. He knew exactly what they needed to talk about.

"Subaru: Why the hell're you trying to restore the Book of Wisdom? No, before that, when did you pick up its remnants?"

"Otto: It was a year ago, after we've settled the problems in the Sanctuary. After Emilia-sama's snow disappeared, I was wandering around the premises when I..... well, it wasn't exactly by chance. I heard what happened from Ram-san, so I was actively looking for its burned remnants as well"

"Subaru: So then, the one you found was Roswaal's Book of Wisdom?"

"Otto: Yes. I was unusually lucky since that happened to be the place I wanted to check out"

"Unusually lucky" must be a jab at how usually unlucky he was. Although Otto was wryly smiling, Subaru was in no mood to share that sentiment. Because Otto's reasons for doing this was still a knot inside Subaru's chest.

"Otto: Tell me honestly, Natsuki-san, what do you think of Margrave Mathers?"

"Subaru: Roswaal?"

As Subaru sank into silence, Otto posed him this question. It sounded both somewhat relevant to the topic at hand, and yet not relevant at all. For a moment, Subaru pondered on the question,

"Subaru: Well... I think we definitely can't let down our guard about that guy. Not after everything that happened a year ago. But, since that guy's goals are clear now, and assuming they haven't changed, I don't see him as an immediate threat. In fact, now that we understand each other, I kinda feel like an accomplice"

"Otto: I don't trust Margrave Mathers at all"

Otto declared, pointing out how naive Subaru's thinking was. Hearing this, Subaru widened his eyes at the sharpness of that statement.

"Otto: You mentioned what happened a year ago. Yes, that's true. But he has been plotting long before what happened in the Sanctuary. You and Emilia-sama seem to be awfully forgiving about that"

"Subaru:It's not that we forgave him. Everything that guy does makes me want to scream "*What the hell*", and I'm still super pissed off. But, the fact is, we need that guy's help. So there's not much we can do, and Emilia has the same considerations"

"Otto: That's called being forgiving.Though I'm not saying that's a bad thing"

Otto shot an impatient gaze at Subaru, conveying his sense of urgency. In other words, Otto was telling him that he wasn't nearly wary enough. Of course, Subaru knew that it was something he had to keep eye on, but,

"Otto: It's fine. The way you're approaching it is fine. There's no need to change that. Since I'll be seeing to the necessary precautions"

"Subaru: Precautions?"

"Otto: As the Internal Minister, I've had plenty of opportunities to interact with Margrave Mathers. From what I've seen over the past year, I didn't notice any signs of scheming or strange behaviors. But, that's not to say he couldn't have already laid his plans before that. He could easily have put some sort of delayed-activation in place"

"Subaru: ————"

Subaru closed his mouth. Otto's wariness and concerns got through.

He had every reason to distrust Roswaal. It was just the natural consequence of that man's actions, be it good or bad. Though in this case, mostly bad.

"Otto: If he follows the Book of Wisdom's every word and believes that it foretells the future, then one look inside the book will let us know everything that he is planning. That way we can take the necessary measures to guard against any betrayals in the future"

"Subaru: You mean, you want to restore that book..... because you don't trust Roswaal?"

"Otto:Quite the opposite. It's precisely because I don't want to distrust my allies that I want to make sure. At least, I want to know for sure that nothing unfortunate is going to happen. So I kept the Book of Wisdom in hopes of restoring it.I didn't consult you before doing this, sorry about that"

With this apology, Otto lowered his head.
But, in front of him, Subaru couldn't say a word. He did not feel like he had the right.

Otto's concerns and the actions he took to resolve them——
They were all things that Subaru and Emilia should have noticed. In fact, the pains he took to do this were entirely for Subaru and Emilia's sake.

Now that he realized how Otto had been silently helping him, Subaru felt at once ashamed, remorseful, and incredulous that he hadn't realized this earlier. And why would Otto do this for him? Was it just because they are friends?

"Otto: I won't tell you why, though. It's pretty boring anyway"

As if having read Subaru's thoughts, Otto replied.
Being beaten to the punch by the smiling Otto, Subaru breathed a deep sigh.

"Subaru: Somehow, it's like you're always bailing me out, you know"

"Otto: That may be, but I think you're good just the way you were when you made that broadcast, Natsuki-san"

Otto scratched his head, while Subaru clicked his tongue and dropped his shoulders, a bit embarrassed by his considerations.

"Subaru: I understand. I'm on board about the Book of Wisdom. But the

problem is, those assholes are still looking for it. So what do we actually do?"

"Otto: Regardless of whether it's successfully restored or not, I think we better get it back. There's a great chance that Master Dartz could get hurt, and that'd be the last thing I want"

"Subaru: But we're going to simultaneously attack all four Control Towers. We don't have any forces to spare for that"

"Otto: I may be a non-combatant, but I can more than handle myself if I travel by the waterways. I may not look like it, but duping animals like water dragons is one of my top strong suits, you know"

Putting his hand beside his mouth, Otto must be boasting of his Divine Protection of Anima Whispering.

In fact, when it comes to running away, Otto's Divine Protection would actually be quite handy. Besides, the enemy's main forces were concentrated at the Control Towers. Assuming they didn't bring any extra Witch Cultist lackeys, Otto shouldn't be in too much danger.

"Otto: Rather than worry about me, you should be thinking about the assault-teams. You have to save Emilia-sama, after all. That's quite the responsibility"

"Subaru: Understood. I'll take that Greedy asshole's head myself"

That white-haired monster who took Emilia flashed across his mind. That, and the fact that he was a Sin Archbishop, meant that he was an enemy that must be defeated.

"Otto: Shall we head back? They must be about done with the debriefing"

Seeing the invigorated Subaru, Otto turned his head to the meeting room. But, just as Subaru nodded and was about head inside with him,

"??????: Subaru-dono"

He was stopped by a call from the stairway. There was no mistaking who that voice belonged to. The person upstairs, watching him with his stern blue pupils—— was Wilhelm.

"Subaru: Otto, you go on ahead"

"Otto: Alright. We'll continue this later"

Otto went back into the meeting room while Subaru walked up the stairs to meet Wilhelm, waiting on the upper level. Then, as soon as they were at the same height, Wilhelm lightly bowed his eyes.

"Wilhelm: Sorry I could not join the conference. I apologize for the inconvenience"

"Subaru: With the situation as it is, no one would think to blame you, Wilhelm-san. So, um..... how is Crush-san?"

He heard she wasn't well. Or, not just unwell, but in quite a terrible state. As a woman, she probably wouldn't want anyone else to see her like that, either. Thinking back on the wretched state of his leg, he could imagine what kind of damage Crusch must have sustained. And that thought alone made him regret imagining it.

To Subaru query, Wilhelm softly cast down his eyes.

"Wilhelm: Crusch-sama has asked to speak to you, Subaru-dono. May I trouble you to come with me?"

"Subaru: Crusch-san asked for me? No, of course I'll come, but..... is that really alright?"

"Wilhelm: It is her sincere wish. Though Ferris will not be happy about it"

"Subaru:I guess not"

Ferris would probably have some bitter words to say to Subaru. After all, the only two who faced off against Capella on the top floor of the City Hall were Subaru and Crusch, and Subaru alone should have protected her.

"Wilhelm: If Ferris says something disrespectful, please do not mind him. And please forgive him, if possible. Deep down, he does understand. It's just that he is facing emotions that he could not process"

"Subaru: Watching the person most important to him suffer... I can understand why he'd want to curse the people around him, if only just to take his mind off of the one he's worrying about"

If venting his rage could ease some of his pain, then who could blame him? And so Subaru was prepared to take on some of his abuse as well.

"Wilhelm: This way"

Without remarking on Subaru's reply, Wilhelm led Subaru towards the place where Crusch would be waiting. Tick, tack, the regular rhythm of their footsteps echoed through the hallway.

And on the way,

"Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, there is something else I need to tell you"

"Subaru: What is it? Is it something other than Crusch-san.....?"

"Wilhelm: It's about the two swordsmen accompanying the Sin Archbishops"

Unwittingly, he stopped his breath.

It should have been so obvious, how did he let it slip his mind? Mimi's unsealable wound, inflicted by the *"Divine Protection of the Death-God"*. The true identities of those super-class swordsman should——

"Wilhelm: One of them is *"Eight Armed"* Kurgan. A formidable swordsman who had been a general of the Vollachian Empire, a man who should have died ten years ago"

"Subaru: A man who... should have died? Uhm, Wilhelm-san..."

"Wilhelm: And the other..."

Wilhelm cut Subaru off just before he could ask his question.

He stopped his steps, and Subaru followed suit. Then, Wilhelm turned his back, and sank into a momentary silence. Subaru took a step forward to peek at the side of Wilhelm's face—— but instantly regretted it.

He should not have seen it.

"Wilhelm: ——The other, is the Previous-Generation Sword Saint, Thearesia Van Astrea. My wife..... who should have died in battle against the White Whale fifteen years ago"

"Subaru: ————"

The fact that he could have kept his voice so steady must be a testament to the strength of his will.

But when Subaru saw the wrenching agony that twisted the side of Wilhelm's face, all that impression fell away.

Chewing his lips, with rage and grief interwoven within his eyes, a crazed passion contorted his wrinkled face beyond recognition—— one look at that expression, and all his emotions were clear as day.

"Subaru: Your wife... and a general of the Empire? Unless... they're actually still alive.....?"

"Wilhelm: If that's..... no, that isn't possible. Whether it's my wife or Kurgan, both of them are dead. That cannot be overturned. The dead are still dead, but being defiled"

"Subaru: If they're still dead, then..... it's something like Necromancy?"

Necromancy—— magic that manipulates the dead, is quite common in fictional universes. Of course, as far as fiction is concerned, magic that can return the dead to life is quite common as well. Although, nothing so convenient exists in this world.

This was something Subaru had painfully come to understand in the year-and-several-months he had spent here.

"Wilhelm: Magic that manipulate the dead are forbidden. Though I do know of someone who once used it. In the Demi-Human Wars—— the civil war in Lugnica between Humans and Demi-Humans decades ago, she was one of the three enemies of the Kingdom fighting on the Demi-Humans' side"

"Subaru: Three enemies of the Kingdom.....?"

"Wilhelm: The Demi-Human Hero, Libre Fermi. The Great Strategist, Valga Cromwell. And....."

After pausing for a moment,

"Wilhelm: The Witch, Sphinx. The abominable existence who, without batting an eye, ruthlessly spilled the blood of Human and Demi-Human alike. The only Witch besides Satella whose name remains in the History of the Kingdom"

Chapter 45: An Inescapable Curse

Subaru shuddered as heard Wilhelm speak the name of a Witch he had never heard of before.

The only 'Witches' he knew besides Satella had been the six Witches of Sin he met in Echidna's tomb.

That a Witch other than those somehow existed was devastating news.

"Subaru: Then, Wilhelm-san, if that Sphinx witch is involved with this raid by the Witch Cult..... Are you saying, other than the Archbishops there's another Witch too?"

If so, the main enemies numbered four Archbishops and two undead swordsmen. Adding another Witch to their ranks only makes the already difficult odds even more desperate.

At Subaru's concerns, Wilhelm, while raising his hand,

"Wilhelm: Pardon me, my wording was unclear. The existence of the Witch known as 'Sphinx' perished in the Demihuman War. That one could not have been involved in this raid."

"Subaru: The witch's dead? You're sure about that? Pretending to be dead, or having lots of freedom even after really dying is kinda the impression I have of witches."

Satella was like that. Whenever Subaru violated the taboo it would draw her out. And, in the Citadel of Dreams enjoying her afterlife, Echidna was the same. When it comes to witches, even hearing they were dead guarantees nothing at all.

"Wilhelm: What impression Subaru-dono has of witches I am unaware. But Sphinx is only named a witch, it is merely an existence which was called that. The fact is, the forces of the Kingdom referred to it as such, but the concerned party never called itself the same."

"Subaru: Calling them a concerned party... Did Wilhelm-san ever meet them directly?"

"Wilhelm: There were many times during the civil war. For the end of the Demihuman War, the deciding moment may even have been the beheading of the Sphinx. Roswaal, Bordeaux, and his wife were leading figures of that time."

"Subaru: Roswaal!?"

An unexpected name popping up caused Subaru to open his eyes wide. At that reaction from Subaru, Wilhelm slightly lowered his head for a moment and became immersed in thought.

"Wilhelm: Between the Sage and Lord Roswaal, a relationship existed. It was not that we were friendly at the time.....I was the one in their care."

"Subaru: Someone called a Sage.....Ah, it must be like. A hereditary title just like Roswaal's name."

"Wilhelm: Unfortunately the Sage passed away at a young age. After that, the Lord Mathers is still so estranged such that he has only acquaintances. No, saying that much was unnecessary."

He was now lending an ear to tales of surprising relationships, but the original topic was definitely not about that.

Subaru nodded his head, and then Wilhelm with "And so" continued his tale.

"Wilhelm: Not the Sphinx, but somehow a being using a spell that acts similarly, is my thought. The method of controlling the dead was at the time called cases of 'Corpse Soldiers'."

"Subaru: Corpse Soldiers.....That... Does it have anything like weaknesses?"

"Wilhelm: From what I know, the Corpse Soldier is limited to a technique for moving the body. It is not such that it can bring back abilities possessed in life. It merely shames the dead while keeping the appearance, and actually reflects the skills of the culprit instead."

"Subaru: But, the 'Eight Arms' and..... That."

He was at a loss for words.

The one turned into a Corpse Soldier whose very death was being profaned was Wilhelm's wife. Nevertheless, at Wilhelm who had accepted it Subaru was speaking of it like he was hesitating.

Wilhelm made a bitter face at Subaru's reluctance.

"Wilhelm: I thank you for your concern. But, it is necessary.—Mh, my wife and Kurgan's skills are close to how they were in life. It simply exceeds the power Corpse Soldier can pull out."

"Subaru: Then, isn't possible that this is something other than Corpse Soldier? If so, then your wife might not even have died....."

"Wilhelm: My wife is dead. Because my strength was lacking."

The side hanging onto a fragile hope here was Subaru. That Subaru's feelings Wilhelm's clear voice cut down with a single stroke. And the words Subaru could say to that elder swordsman's profile were none at all.

"Wilhelm: Even at the time, that which could not simply be judged as merely a Corpse Soldier did very rarely exist. Whether it was due to aptitude in the procedure, or if rather another factor I do not know, but.....We have to consider the strength of those two as such."

"Subaru: Do you have a way to take them down?"

"Wilhelm: Thoroughly destroying the body, or cutting away too the curse mark somewhere on the body. Then the Corpse Soldier will return to a simple corpse. It must be done this way."

The deeply thinking Wilhelm's voice could not easily be heard.

Searching for what he should do, coming to conclusions with effort he was searching for it.—His trembling voice, his clenched fist, his scrunched eyes, he was hiding nothing.

"Wilhelm: I apologize for holding you this long. Crusch-sama cannot be made to wait any longer. Now, this way."

Wilhelm bent his back and indicated the door at the room they had come up to. On the innermost part of the 4th floor, with a crumbled plate labeling it as a lounge was the room.

Inside, Crusch who had called Subaru was waiting.

Passing Wilhelm's side, Subaru with the sound of footsteps headed for the

door.

Definitely, the distance to the door felt awfully long. The soles of his shoes stuck to the floor and interfered with Subaru's progress, that was the impression he got.

That it was his defeated self's weakness, Subaru was clearly aware of it.

"Subaru: —It's me. Natsuki Subaru. Is... Crusch-san?"

He knocked on the door, and with a voice so quiet he wondered if it reached the other called out. Like that, after a moment's brief silence, the other side slowly opened the door.

The face that appeared was Ferris'. But, his appearance had changed entirely.

"Ferris: Subaru-kyun....."

Red eyes puffed up from crying and disheveled brown hair. Covering his body was, not his, but someone else's blood staining black, and with his white skin splattered he must not have had time to clean. His cheek and neck was also smeared with fresh blood.

At that miserable appearance, his breath inadvertently caught in his throat.

"Subaru: Crusch-san called me, I heard. So."

"Ferris: Yeah. Inside, she's on the bed.....Definitely don't do anything unnecessary please."

A firm voice, with some hatred near the end.

However, that hate was not directed at Subaru. It could be said to be directed at everything. Hating everyone in this world, rage with nowhere to go was now controlling Ferris.

Taking a deep breath, Subaru followed Ferris inside.

Even calling it a lounge, it was not a very spacious room. Long tables and chairs were arranged in two rows, and further back, the small room was divided by a threshold. The bed was past it.

And, on that shabby bed lay her.

"Crusch: Na, tski-sama?"

The conscious Crusch recognized Subaru had entered and called him by name.

Reacting to that girl's voice, Subaru's neck grew rigid. Readying himself, feigning calm, calling out assuring words.—To be unable to even do something so simple..

"Crusch: My appearance is not presentable... My apologies....."

"Subaru:No, that's not, like that..... It's. Not like that."

Seeing the frozen appearance of Subaru, Crusch apologized in a lethargic voice. At that girl's sorrowful attitude, the shaken Subaru spoke with vague words.

—Having been drenched in Capella's blood and clothed in its curse, Crusch was in a wretched state.

Her neck, the back of her hands and feet, over all skin that could be seen dark-blackened veins shone. It was not difficult to imagine that under the towels and blankets and clothes the skin there would be afflicted with the same. These black blood vessels that pulsed instead of circulating blood, as if a writhing serpent seemed to be strangling the thin Crusch's body instead.

That formerly white, unblemished skin of hers was now being violated horribly.

Of course, the damage was not limited to below the neck. The gallant Crusch's clever visage, reminiscent of a long drawn sword—Its left had received disfiguring stains. Compared to that, the right side of her face retained her beauty. That rather emphasized the contrast between the two sides, and made the unfairness of a noble person being defiled more apparent. As if covering the left eye, a patch was hung there, and the sight underneath it was difficult to imagine.

"Subaru: This is.....The same curse of dragon's blood as on me?"

If it was just the same, then that much was not cruel at all. Knowing Crusch Karsten, Subaru's worry did not end at that.

He looked down at his own right leg. Like Crusch's skin, it also was mottled and wrapped with blackened veins. However, Subaru's leg, terrible sight notwithstanding, was otherwise unaffected. Neither pain nor feelings of soreness were felt by him at all.

But Crusch was definitely different. Her breathing was labored, and whenever the dark veins pulsed, she sighed as if resisting pain.

"Subaru: Ferris....."

How is it not cured, he turned to gaze at the greatest healer in the kingdom. However, that Subaru's brief thought only served to hurt Ferris, who was gritting his teeth helplessly, even more.

Biting down on his lips, stabbing his own arms with his nails while bowing his head was Ferris. Ferris understood his lack of power and was dismayed by it more than anyone else there.

Knowing the relationship between the two, Subaru had no reason to doubt all possible methods beyond his imagination had been exhausted already.

"Subaru: Crusch-san.....To me...What is it?"

Why, in such a painful situation had she called out for him? That there was something he could do, he didn't think so. Maybe there was something she wanted to say. To ask for revenge on the 'Lust' that had made her this way. Perhaps even some resentful words would be directed towards Subaru.

Even if fed insults, even if curses are poured on, he'll accept it all.

At Subaru's question, Crusch opened her mouth as if it pained her to do so. Lending those lips his whole body, not missing the feeble sigh she gave, he focused and listened.

And

"Crusch:Un...Unharmmed...I'm relieved."

"Subaru: ————"

"Crusch: The same.....As me...Were cursed too.....I heard....."

Subaru felt a burden lift from her in the softness of her relieved sigh. At the same time, he understood the true feelings in his heart, and he grew so angry at his own stupidity he wanted to die.

He had been thinking it would be easier to be criticized. So he had doubted Crusch's integrity, and cut down in his view her noble heart.

And she had just been truly worried, that Subaru had been afflicted with the same pain as herself.

"Subaru: Sor.....I'm sorry...Crusch-san....."

Having suspected her feelings, the result of things having been her suffering, being unable to suffer instead on her behalf, in a voice mixed with all those feelings he squeezed out.

Without realizing what he was doing, he stretched out his hand and grasped the hands Crusch had weakly laid over her stomach. The black blood vessels had no special texture even if touched. That the feel of skin with this ruined of an appearance did not change was even more pitiful. But,

"Crusch: Fu, u.....?"

"Subaru: Gu!?"

The suddenly falling sound of Crusch's sigh, and at the same time a pained noise from Subaru's throat overlapped.

Agony as if he had grasped a hot iron stabbed into him from his palm. In an instant, Subaru released Crusch's hand and stared at the palm the sensation had come from.

That blackened erosion was spreading over it.

"Subaru: Wh-, at.....!?"

"Ferris: Show me, Subaru-kyun!"

Grasping the groaning and hurt Subaru's hand, Ferris inspected the erosion. The light of healing blanketed the spot, but there was no sign of either the pain or the affliction fading away. Instead——

"Subaru: Ferris.....Crusch-san's hand!"

"Ferris: Eh.....?"

The wide-eyed Subaru's gaze pulled Ferris to where he was looking. And those yellow eyes, seeing the same thing as Subaru now widened too.

Subaru had grasped Crusch's left hand——On that hand, though slightly, the blackened erosion had thinned.

That change, and looking down at his right hand, what was passing through

Subaru's mind was.

"Subaru: No way, it moved from Crusch's body to mine.....Is that it?"

It could only be thought of like that. The touched hand and the change on his own was directly a plus and a minus. That the lightened curse had traveled to Subaru's body from Crusch, there was no reason to doubt.

"Ferris: Bu, but, I haven't changed at all? I examined Crusch-sama's body, I touched her many many times since..... Me, for me....."

At Subaru's hypothesis, Ferris shook his head. That was not joy at a possibility for healing being found, but rather an appearance of suspecting that the hypothesis was false. No, his own feelings were definitely different.

"Ferris: I can't make Crusch-sama feel better....."

"Subaru: Then let's try it one more time."

Pushing aside the taken-aback Ferris, Subaru once again stood before Crusch. Crusch, with a face that was unaware of what had occurred yet was directing glistening eyes at the approaching Subaru. To not show a frozen face for that eyepatch-wearing single-eyed gaze, Subaru took a deep breath. To check it again, this time, he lightly brushed Crusch's cheek.

"Subaru: —Gu, euh!"

Immediately after, Subaru's brain was stabbed. With pain as if magma spilled into his veins. Through the tips of his fingers, the body-violating curse in Crusch's body flowed in and burned his senses.

"Subaru: Ga, aaaah!"

Feeling stabbing pains which were difficult to bear, Subaru loudly screamed and yanked his body away. Like that, falling back with the momentum, the hand which was touching Crusch fell away.

"Subaru: Ah, ha, haa....."

His lungs shivered, and his eyeballs cramped.

Like a fish on land, parting his lips Subaru desperately sought oxygen.

"Ferris: Su, Subaru-kyun.....Are you ok?"

Seeing his breathing start to calm, Ferris spoke to Subaru. Barely able to spare enough feeling to notice the hard floor he had landed on, he raised his body with difficulty.

And gazing up at the face of Crusch lying in bed

"Subaru: How is it, Ferris. Was it a little effective?"

"Ferris: Ah....."

With a plop, Ferris who had confirmed Crusch's condition sat back down again.

He too would have seen with his own eyes. The cheek which was eroded by the curse was, from that curse, relieved a little bit. If such treatment was possible, then saving Crusch was also——.

"Crusch: You can't, Natsuki-sama....."

To try once more Subaru rose. However, it was none other than Crusch herself that stopped him.

Not understanding the meaning of her words, Subaru asked.

"Subaru: Did you not...notice? Your hand is....."

"Crusch: ——Hand?"

Hearing this, she looked down at her right hand. And it was then that she finally realized the change that had occurred.

Just like the right leg blackened veins spread over the skin. That much was fine. If it was that much, his resolve to take on Crusch's curse would not be shaken. But, there was definitely something strange here.

Compared to the erosion which had been taken from Crusch, the extent was much greater.

The erosion on her body, the darkened parts of her left hand and cheek had grown a shade lighter due to Subaru's touch.

However, Subaru who had taken it up onto his right arm from the elbow down to the back of the skin had been completely covered by the blackened erosion. The degree of it was definitely not comparable at all.

The ratio the curse was transferred at was not one-to-one. It was more on the

level of ten-to-one.

"Subaru: No, even then....."

Whether that was cause to hesitate was another matter.

There was pain in the moment of transfer. But, once it had been accepted onto the body, there was no sign yet that the curse would actually hurt Subaru.

Compared to Crusch's constant hellish suffering, what Subaru received was but for a moment. There, between man or woman, which side should bear the burden of its torture, there wasn't even any need to consider it.

Whether it was his right leg or right hand blackening, if it was for the sake of saving Crusch it didn't matter.

"Crusch: Natsuki-sama, that cannot be.....I am unable to accept those feelings."

"Subaru: Don't be silly. It only stings a little so it's fine. Compared to getting a tattoo while showing off and regretting it later, let's think about it as dirtying a body that was like that in the first place. I can take away the pain too. It's strange, but it doesn't give me any trouble. So."

"Crusch: Can you guarantee that will be true in the future?It could be that both Natsuki-sama and I become unable to fight. In this current situation that would be a fatal blow....."

Worrying more for the city and the people than her own body, that was Crusch's judgment. It was logically sound, but not everything should be pressed forward with just that.

"Crusch: Ferris, please stop Natsuki-sama....."

"Ferris: I, I am....."

"Crusch: Please. Because Natsuki-sama is now one who is needed by others than just myself....."

"Ferris: If Subaru-kyun resolved to help..... K-Krusch-sama's suffering.."

The hesitating judgment of Ferris was one which kept Crusch first. That nobody could blame him for. None of those present was in the wrong, after all. The notion that 'whatever is not wrong is right' was mistaken.

"Crusch: You must not be overwhelmed by the emotions of a single moment. Natsuki-sama, I ask of you....."

"Subaru: Crusch-san, even then I am."

"Crusch: Didn't...You say so before.——What's left, leave it all to me."

"Subaru: ——Euh!"

Crusch's pleading eyes took hold of Subaru and would not let go. Had those reliable words come from his mouth? Hearing that, for Crusch to say all that, was she telling him to..?

"Crusch: Please say that to...Me as well....."

"Subaru: ————"

"Crusch: 'All that's left, to leave it all to me.'"

A pained smile was awaiting Subaru's words. Swallowing his breath and shifting his tongue in his dry mouth, Subaru quietly closed his eyes.

Without thinking of the future, only immersed in what was in front of him, he was making her say things that didn't need to be said, so at least——.

"Subaru: Crusch-san, calmly rest here, please."

"Crusch:Natsuki...sama."

"Subaru: Because everything that's left, you can leave it all to me."

"Crusch:——Yes."

If it was just filling the needed role and saying the desired words, then it just had to be done.

Hearing Subaru's reply, Crusch took a deep breath and seemed to relax. Her eyelids weakly blinking shut not a moment after proved that, up until now, by any means possible she had been holding onto attentiveness. At that moment breathing a quiet sigh, Crusch once more began her time of battling with the effects of the curse.

"Subaru: Sorry, Ferris. But I have to go now."

"Ferris: I'm.....What should I...Is it alright?"

Draping a towel like a blanket over Crusch and standing up, Subaru heard a small voice as he was leaving. It was the first time Subaru had seen Ferris showing weakness.

In his innermost thoughts, what he wanted now was to remain at Crusch's side. But in the current situation, Ferris' ability would not allow for such a thing.

"Subaru: I need your strength. I'm not saying to leave City Hall. But if something happens, I'll let them know to evacuate the wounded here. So, I'll leave that to you."

"Ferris:The one I wanted to save most...And I can't help them."

"Subaru: Ferris....."

"Ferris: Sorry. I said something silly.....Just give me a moment, please."

While looking away, Ferris sat down on a chair next to the bed. Subaru finally lightly patted his shoulder and stepped out of the lounge.

Unchanged from when he had entered, Wilhelm remained waiting in the hallway.

"Wilhelm: Thank you very much for considering Crusch-sama's feelings."

Towards the returning Subaru Wilhelm said this. Did what happened within leak out outside, or perhaps Subaru's expression was just easy to read?

"Subaru: It isn't some noble tale like I considered her feelings. Since it's more a story of how I was encouraged.....My body, what's up with it anyway?"

Taking on Crusch's curse, and its effect being weakened against him in the first place. Going back even further, the so-called witch factor and 'Return by Death', all of it was really vague.

One day, would he get to see their reasons and their end?

"Subaru: Crusch-san will leave it to Ferris. When everything is solved, I'm thinking of trying what I did before once more."

"Wilhelm: Is that right arm all right?"

"Subaru: At first glance it's a bit iffy. If I wore long sleeves and wore gloves it

might be ok.....For the sake of rescuing a pretty girl, just one scar that doesn't fade away isn't any trouble at all."

Even though he had some aversion to it, that was Subaru's true feelings. If there wasn't any other solution, then taking on Crusch's curse fully was also fine. Even if his body became pitch-black because of it. Emilia, Rem, and Beatrice, he would have to beg forgiveness from all of them.

"Subaru: But, that's all talk for after we pass this hurdle and live. Wilhelm-san, let's head down. They're probably talking about the plan to retake the control towers right now."

Probably, all the top-class powers that this side could muster would already be gathered there.

What followed after would depend on the cooperation and abilities of the Archbishops of Sin, as well as the timing and execution of the plan of attack. From the deadline imposed by the Witch Cult, only six hours were left.

"Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, regarding that matter I have a request."

"Subaru: A request?"

Wilhelm's words stopped Subaru as he headed for the stairs—The elder swordsman nodded his head with the lobby door behind his back, showing concern in his eyes for his mistress within.

"Wilhelm: If it is possible, please recommend for me the task of subjugating 'Lust'. Since I understand well its powers of mutation and super-regeneration, I will request this of you."

"Subaru: Is that revenge for Crusch-san?"

"Wilhelm: It is so, but beyond that, it is essential to capture 'Lust' alive and hear from it about what was done to Crusch. For that I will even become a demon. Before cutting off its head, I will definitely pry from it the truth."

The killing intent given off by the Sword Demon felt like a wave of heat to Subaru.

Furiously, darkly, having been unable to do anything, Wilhelm's ardor to avenge his mistress now rose up like flames.

"Subaru: That spirit is fine.....But are the corpse soldiers alright?"

"Wilhelm: — — — —"

"Subaru: Your wife, wouldn't you know her best? No matter what happens, Wilhelm will be needed to make judgments."

"Wilhelm: Subaru-dono, has Reinhard arrived below?"

Wilhelm suddenly interrupted as he spoke of his concerns. Awkwardly, Subaru nodded. Reinhard's powers could not be left out of the attack. However, that the warriors would be there as obstacles for him was certain.

"Wilhelm: The true nature of the corpse soldiers, could you avoid speaking of it to Reinhard?"

"Subaru:Huh?"

The perplexed Subaru was unable to grasp the reason for the abrupt request.

"Subaru: Then.....Don't tell that guy about Wilhelm's wife.....Is that what you mean?"

"Wilhelm: Yes, it is so. For Reinhard..... For my son, I want to avoid him meeting my wife in the form of a corpse soldier. He will surely blame me. Because the fault is none other than my own."

"Subaru: Wilhelm-san's fault, to say that kind of thing.."

It's not true, he wanted to say, but Subaru could not carelessly remark so. Because the image of Heinkel's appearance ruining the mood earlier in the morning had appeared in his mind.

There was no credibility. But it could not be denied. Reinhard considered Wilhelm the cause of his wife's death. And such a difficult and unbelievable past he did not deny.

"Wilhelm: Does Subaru-dono think that the 'Blessing of the Sword Saint' as something special?"

"Subaru:.....Honestly speaking, I would say I know little about it. Maybe the people called 'Sword Saint' all had it and if you have it you become incredibly

strong, I only have an impression like that....."

"Wilhelm: To know of it as that isn't wrong. But if there is a difference between the 'Blessing of the Sword Saint' and other blessings.....Is that, it can be inherited."

"Subaru: An inherited...Blessing....."

At Subaru's breath, Wilhelm nodded.

The elder swordsman closed his eyes as if recalling sorrowful memories.

"Wilhelm: That blessing has passed down without fail from the time of Reid Astrea. The blessing became the inheritance of the Astrea family, and always a member of the clan was chosen to be the next Sword Saint. My wife's blessing definitely passed down to Reinhard."

"Subaru: So a blessing that is inherited down the clan.....Is it...Is that so. And when your wife passed away, the blessing transferred to Reinhard."

While understanding that too, something caught in Subaru's head as he was growing convinced.

After the Sword Saint was slain by the White Whale, the line of succession led to Reinhard. It was a sad past, but one that could also be described a proper passing on.

That flow did not fit at all with what had been said in the argument between Astreas this morning.

Wilhelm's heartbreak, Heinkel's mockery, Reinhard's silence, was interfering with the idea of a proper succession.

And the answer is——

"Wilhelm: It was, at the time of the White Whale subjugation."

"Subaru: Wilhelm...san....."

"Wilhelm: Reinhard received the blessing while my wife was in the middle of the expedition against the White Whale. During that conflict, my wife, abandoned by the sword, could only take on the battle as an ordinary woman."

——That was the truth of the Astrea family division.

In the midst of the battle to subjugate the White Whale, the blessing had

suddenly passed down during the fighting. And, on the battlefield, the result was that only the now-former Sword Saint remained.

Now left a predecessor and an ordinary person, to defend many other soldiers she had still fought with the Witchfiend——And they had lost contact with her.

"Wilhelm: The one that took away the sword from my wife was none other than me. Overruling my wife who was loved by the sword, forcing her to cast it aside, and turning her into an ordinary woman, it was none other than myself. That, was what called forth the death of my wife."

"Subaru: ——"

"Wilhelm: The sword that my wife betrayed did not forgive her, and so her blessing was taken away on the battlefield. She could rely only on a single blade, I think of how she must have felt then.....It was true that I could not accept it, and defamed Reinhard whom the blessing had chosen. As he was weeping over the death of his mother and bearing the heavy new burden, I impetuously could not forgive him...I, regret that now."

Last night, the regret that Wilhelm had revealed to Subaru——It, was that mistake.

Even knowing that Reinhard had not done anything wrong, Wilhelm had been mourning his wife's death and was unable to accept it. As a result, the Astreas had split apart.

"Wilhelm: I do not want to repeat it again. Reinhard has no blame in my wife's death. I have no reason to blame my grandson at all."

And so, instead of revealing it to Reinhard he was saying he would bring this to a close himself.

That feeling, he now understood painfully well from this talk. If Subaru could do it, he wanted to as well. But, the burden Wilhelm bore was too high.

"Subaru: About Crusch-san and your wife.....It will be buried there, Wilhelm-san. Even if I don't talk about the corpse soldiers, the question of where they might appear is.."

"Wilhelm: That is definitely a needless worry, Subaru-dono."

"Subaru: Huh.....?"

Wilhelm shook his head at Subaru as he was about to point out that it was not certain.

And the Sword Demon spoke as his expression twisted into a fearsome grimace.

"Wilhelm: —Because, there is no chance of my wife not coming to meet me."

Chapter 46: Where The Heart Is

When going back to the rendezvous point with Wilhelm, everyone had been looking forward to Subaru's return. With Reinhard looking at Wilhelm, the grandfather welcomed the reunion with his grandchild while pulling his chin. While the two stood together along the wall exchanging sidelong glances, Subaru sat down next to Otto at the round table.

"Subaru: I'm sorry for being late. How did the negotiations turn out?"

"Otto: We just ended up with the same matters we got from the start. It will surely be better from Natsuki-san's side how is Crusch-sama doing?"

"Subaru: It seems she isn't doing well. However, it's not like we can already say that there is no hope. Once we get to the negotiations after driving out the witch cult, we might be able to do something."

"Otto: Is that so? If that's the case then that alone is good news."

With Otto stroking his chest with a *ho*, everyone else having listened to the story also made a similar gesture of relief. While viewing their reactions, deep down, Subaru wanted to give them a heartfelt apology. Although it wasn't a lie, it was a statement which was far removed from reality. There might be a way to save Crusch, which would also be considerably risky for Subaru. If her conditions were among the same conditions as Subaru's, he would expect her chances to rise considerably. (TN: Probably referring to the conditions needed for the dragon's blood injected by Capella to not be rejected or something like that)

"Subaru: Either way, Crusch-san's return to the frontlines for this battle is impossible. Since it seems that Ferris also doesn't want to be separated from her, I think it would be best if the relief party were to stay behind at the city hall. Additionally, where we'll be meeting, there is the possibility that we will become unable to communicate."

"Anastasia: That means the plan to attack the four places simultaneously hasn't changed. Seems that gettin' to the location from the city hall in the center as seen from each control tower comes first, right? Then... ..."

With a clap, Anastasia looked out over everyone's faces.

"In that case, shall we finally truly go into the main issue? — — There are four control towers and four Sin Archbishops. For the sake of defeating them, we will hold a war strategy meeting."

From Crusch's faction was the "Sword devil" Wilhelm.

From Felt's faction was the "Sword saint" Reinhard.

From Anastasia's faction were the "Valuable knight" Julius and the "Leader of the iron fang" Ricardo.

From Emilia's faction were the "Spirit knight" Subaru and the "Shield of the Sanctuary" Garfiel.

And then, from Priscilla's faction was — —

"Priscilla: Me and Al will be together."

"Subaru: Although you said such a thing will you fight as well? You're a Royal selection candidate, aren't you?"

When each faction's fighters were affirming, Priscilla boldly raised her own name. When Subaru scowled at that, she snorted at him so as to try and scoff at him.

"Priscilla: I would surely be a candidate for the throne, don't you think? Since the previously important fool has become useless, you've united every last one of the untaken weakling fighters. I stand above everybody both at the sword and on the stage precisely because I am who I am."

"Wilhelm: Now you've become difficult to ignore. With "fool", surely you musn't mean my lord by that?"

"Priscilla: Since I have something in mind, just don't stand in my way, I guess. There's a devious expression, old soldier. Through withdrawal by "losing a fly to catch a trout" and the like, the tales of the chosen cannot be told."

From the start of the discussion, Wilhelm and Priscilla already clashed with a dangerous presence. Seemingly habitually ignoring the scene, because of various circumstances Wilhelm's side could not afford to waste time. Since Priscilla's side generally operated in an excessive manner, that also did not leave out hateful language.

"Anastasia: Yeah yeah, let's move the discussions forward, because both the weaklin' and the fool stuff is all fine by me. We ain't gonna turn on each other."

"Priscilla: Oh, that's boring. Isn't my obedient listening to the weakling's story to a manageable degree?"

"Anastasia: I guess it wasn't like the story was about the victory of the weak? If you do not show the extent of your magnanimity, then nobody will follow you. Everyone is getting equally irritated. Have some patience."

"Priscilla: Hmph"

As Anastasia's remark was missing its target, Priscilla did not object as she only snorted. As she watched the weapon being pointed at her, Wilhelm, who had been staring daggers at her, had also withdrawn it. Since it was natural that there were disagreements between the factions, he made a serious face.

"Wilhelm: Well then, Priscilla-sama's faction will be Priscilla-sama and Al together even if your boy cannot expect to be taken into consideration?"

"Priscilla: Can something even be done by such a very delicate and weak child? That child has been accompanying me throughout merely for the sake of serving me. Naturally, we will put him aside beforehand."

"Wilhelm: Understood. Then it's been decided that we'll capture the four locations with no less than eight fighters."

The boy who was Priscilla's butler — — Schult, while drooping his head, was exactly evenly split between fighting and not fighting at the round table. Leaving out the names of the eight combatants, the non-combatants were Anastasia, Schult, Liliana and Otto with Crusch and Ferris on the upper floor making six people.

"Anastasia: Before we split up our fighting force, shall we go ahead and reaffirm our knowledge of the Sin Archbishops once more? Let's see, the person who has seen all their faces is just Natsuki-kun, right?"

"Subaru: Yeah, I think so. Although even I am disgusted with talking about the witch cult's leaders, I will try to get myself to give an explanation. I know about their abilities, though to a certain extent."

While gathering everyone's attention, Subaru began to speak. About the witch cult who which had attacked this city and the horrible Sin Archbishops who controlled it.

"Subaru: First is Wrath. This Sin Archbishop, who calls herself Sirius, is a fellow who's completely wrapped in bandages. I don't know what she looks like, though I believe she's probably a woman. She attacks using the chains wrapped around her arms. In addition, it seems like she also uses fire magic."

"Reinhard: If it's only that then she doesn't seem to be a significant threat. Is she considerably talented?"

"Subaru: If it's said by you, then it's difficult for anyone to answer, Reinhard. If we're talking about simple fighting strength, then Wilhelm or Julius will be able to provide sufficient opposition. Her other ability seemed to be an equal match with Emilia though. Nevertheless, she has the Authority of Wrath."

"Reinhard: An Authority... .. "

Reinhard frowned to that sound as he brought his hand to his chin. Subaru continued as he nodded back at him,

"Subaru: The biggest point about a Sin Archbishop's repulsiveness, is their characteristic ability called their Authority. Being an incomprehensible force which differs from both magic and sorcery, it's useless to even think about how it works. Since every one of them is powerful, defeating the Authority will become the crux of defeating a Sin Archbishop."

"Wilhelm: Since Subaru-dono had supposedly defeated Sloth in the past, was that the Authority itself?"

"Subaru: It was. The Archbishop of Sloth's Authority, the "Unseen hand" was Sloth's second ability. The Authority can grow an unknown number of powerful arms which are not only invisible, but also have incredible strength. If someone were to be caught in them, they could easily completely tear their body apart."

"Julius: Having witnessed them myself, I've also verified their repulsiveness. In practice, it's believable that just by snatching a body its power could gouch out someone's flesh."

Julius followed up on Subaru's explanation.

During the united front against Petelgeuse, it was Subaru lending his eyes that made him see Petelgeuse's "Unseen Hand". He was in an ideal position to reinforce his explanation.

"Subaru: Moreover, Sloth has the ability to forcefully snatch away the energy of people in his range. Whether this was the Authority is difficult to tell, but we overcame it by using spirit art users who were immune to it. This was also because it was me and Julius."

"Julius: Even if we were able to tell whose ability it was, assuming the Sin Archbishop was holding such a terrifying ability, it's not like we would definitely succeed if we were to assign a capable fighter to the right opponent."

"Subaru: You said an unusually good thing, Julius. It's something like that."

When Subaru praised him in his own way, Julius looked at Subaru with a discerning though lukewarm eye. While getting an uncanny feeling from that gaze, Subaru once again clearing his throat continued,

"Subaru: So, let's go back to the discussion about the Authority of Wrath. What we know as of now about Wrath's ability, is the sharing and propagation of emotions and senses."

"???: Sharing ... emotions and senses?"

Since Subaru's explanation didn't really make sense, most of the discussion members tilted their heads. Because it was difficult to explain, it was necessary for Subaru to choose his words carefully.

"Subaru: I mean, It's that Wrath is able to unipolarize the emotions of people in its range. It makes one person's anger into everyone's anger and one person's sadness into everyone's sadness."

"Anastasia: What the heck's that? If that's what it means, then it's simple as to why."

(TN: Interpreting ㇿ as "why". Probably wrong still...)

"Subaru: Certainly if it were just that you would just forcefully make yourself use your ability to sense the mood, but it's not like that. The scary part of this ability is when it's able to unipolarize until it reaches hostility. That is, if Wrath is your opponent and directs their hostility towards your perceived companions, it

will definitely also be transmitted to the people in the perimeter."

"Otto: So it turns the townspeople in its perimeter against us?"

"Subaru: Exactly."

By snapping his fingers, Subaru indicated that Otto had drawn the correct conclusion.

Although it gave everyone depressed looks, the problems didn't end with just that.

"Priscilla: Foolish commoner, did you say that Wrath or whatever can share emotions and senses some time ago?"

As the first to finally reach an understanding, Priscilla reclined on her seat. Piercing through Subaru with her crimson eyes, while concealing her mouth with her folding fan,

"Priscilla: If the explanation from just now was about sharing emotions, then sharing senses is again different. And if we then assume that that is just my way of imagining things, is it not a considerably repulsive ability?"

"Subaru: I don't know how you're imagining it, but it's the worst. Wrath's Authority shares the wounds of people in its range. This does not exclude Wrath's wounds."

"Ricardo: If even the person himself ain't no exception ... hey, bro, that ain't true, innit? Ain't that the worst? In other words, wouldn't other fellas die if Wrath were ta be killed?"

He had already once realized that terrible scene in practice by Reinhard's hand.

Even if they crushed Sirius, who was the source of the malice, that act alone would inflict permanent wounds to the people surrounding them. They wouldn't know if anyone dragged into the fight would be fine if they managed to kill her.

"Priscilla: ——Interesting"

To this hopeless information, everyone held their tongue without coming up with counter-measures. In such a midst just one person, only Priscilla was

cheerfully warping her cheek into a sneer.

"Priscilla: Very well. I will give that Wrath fool a picking. You're free to rejoice."

"Subaru: Well, wait, wait, wait up! Although I don't know why you're so eager, it's not something you can take so lightly! Were you listening to what I said!?"

"Priscilla: Let's settle that I was listening. Thus upon having listened to that, I have declared that I will go. They are indeed a disgusting opponent with cowardly methods, so it's appropriate for me to cut them down."

Without even listening to Subaru's attempts to stop her, Priscilla looked over everyone while folding her fan to make a sound.

With that sharp gaze and zeal, she overwhelmed even strongest fighters present.

"Priscilla: If you've said everything about the Authority, then there is a verse that comes to mind about those Karakuri. "Wanting to be accompanied by the same masses who disregard you" and the like is impertinent. The vulgar masses exist entirely for my sake. If some insolent worm turns their hand to me, I immediately throw them out of my garden."

(TN: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karakuri_puppet most feasible description I could find)

"Al: P, princess Aren't you bragging even a little too much?"

"Priscilla: What kind of foolishness are you saying, Al? Knowing your cowardice, what is it about that you get cold feet from the insolent opponent who sours my mood? With me, there is no point in being afraid if the singer is there."

"Al: It's not like I'm saying it because there's nothing to be afraid... .. Singer?"

When Al tried to stop his master's irrational behaviour, he stopped as he heard an unexpected word. While generously nodding at her follower's surprise, Priscilla, pointed with her folded fan at Liliana who sat at the corner of the round table.

As she suddenly became the topic of the discussion, Liliana opened her eyes

wide at the fan that was thrust before her.

"Liliana: Did mean m-me with that name!? Why are you doing that so suddenly and neglectfully again!?"

"Priscilla: You musn't be forgetting about your travels? How long your songs have shaken the hearts of the masses. You should do the same thing with that. In short, you should fight for the emotions of the vulgar masses and such."

"Liliana: Seems like I was making you anxious just because I raised my voice a little? You might say that under no circumstances you are overestimating me too much, but pressuring a weak young girl like me"

"Priscilla: Oh. So, if it's your choice, you allow the song you inherited from your ancestors to be defeated?"

As Priscilla snorted, Liliana's facial expression changed to Priscilla's words which sounded like she despised her wholeheartedly.

Showing a forced smile, she wore a facial expression with an earnest charm as she menially tried to ward it off.

"Liliana: That is, what do you mean?"

"Priscilla: It seems like it even if you do not think so. Does your song, which has been passed down so zealously, seem like it is being sung when the hearts of the people, which are begging for help, are exposing their sometimes unsightly cowering? That kind of loser's whining, is that not all a bunch of idle futility? Even a dog's barking is still better than insisting on being selfish. There, how is it sinking in? It's like the praise of a loser."

"Liliana: Aah Aah! You're going so far as to say it!? Are you blurting it out!? Fine! I'll go! I've understood alright!? Catching me, the minstrel Liliana, like that! Using such language! A woman will become obsolete with this silence! Even the late Kiritaka-san will come crawling out of his grave with regret like this!"

Because of Priscilla's fierce provocation, Liliana became excited as she intensely exploded back at her. With her face becoming a bright red, she violently strummed the musical instrument placed on top of her lap.

"Liliana: Stop it if you were thinking about letting even a requiem be sung to

comfort Kiritaka-san's soul who pitifully fell into the city's waters! I'm a scramble of emotions? Bring it on! I, the person who has come to inherit the song, and my song, which has dazed the people of the world, will we lose to an unknown power due to something like that!? We don't know the song's power after all! *Grrr!*"

(TN: Probably somewhat inaccurate in some places here. Liliana's manner of speech feels weird in general...)

Schult and Otto hurriedly dragged down the thoroughly excited Liliana who was performing while lying sprawled on top of the round table. Taking a distant view to the corner of the room where Liliana who started playing was held down, Subaru had shifted his focus to Priscilla.

"Subaru: Her manageability aside, you seem sure of her success. But even if you're right, to just throw her into this when you don't know her chances"

"Priscilla: I am not planning to lose or anything. Everything in this world will be made to my liking. Besides, it is because I was together with that singer that I have come so far as to this city hall. After taking her around with me precisely because I recognised that singer's usefulness, I have again decided to take her with me."

"Subaru: Are you saying that Liliana is an opposing force to Sirius?"

"Priscilla: It would be my defeat if it were not for that singer. And something like my defeat is impossible in this world. Therefore, it is because of that singer. Need I explain this any further?"

Because none of the insufficient explanations were feasible, it steadily became unbearable for Subaru. However, it was Schult who raised his hand instead who tried to follow-up on Priscilla's remarks.

The butler boy's adorable eyes quivered as he chose his words with utmost care,

"Schult: U, uh well I think that it's true that Liliana's song has a special power. It's true that they were released from anxiety or irritation when they listened to Liliana-sama's song That is also what we learned from several refuge shelters which we passed by before we came here."

"Subaru: You were letting Liliana sing to the refuge shelters you were

visiting?"

"Priscilla: I believe I said so."

"Subaru: You didn't say that!"

Even the insufficiency of her explanation was excessive.

While being troubled by Priscilla's attitude, Subaru turned his head to Reinhard.

"Subaru: Hey, Reinhard. Do you know of an innate ability that can see people's, or rather Oh right, they're divine protections. Can't such things like divine protections be seen?"

"Reinhard: I think there's a divine protection which learns about people's divine protections. I've heard that the owner of the "Divine protection of Judgement" can see them. They aren't in Lugunica, but in Vollachia, aren't they? I see, so we want to check what kind of divine protection Liliana-sama has? It will certainly become one of our main questions."

When he understood the purpose of Subaru's question, Reinhard went deep into thought.

Since he just tried to ask because he had nothing to lose, even he knew that he had asked something unreasonable from Reinhard. Subaru shook his head to the pondering red haired youth and said "Never mind".

"Subaru: Although I strangely expected something since you said that you heard all kinds of incredible things, it's not like you'd be convenient to that extent. It's fine. For now, we'll be able to cancel Wrath's authority somehow with Liliana's song after testing it a little "

"Reinhard: You don't need to worry about it, Subaru. — I've received it now."

"Subaru: Ha?"

Patting the shoulder of Subaru who tried to propose an experiment with Liliana's song, Reinhard smiled. After that, while narrowing his blue eyes, he gazed at Liliana who was performing in the corner of the room.

And then,

"Reinhard: I was surprised. Liliana holds the "Divine protection of Telepathy"."

"Subaru: I was surprised by you because of the divine protection from just now. Eh? What did you say just now? Did you say that you received it? What did you receive, the treasure that is children?"

"Reinhard: Subaru, it's not a situation to be making fun of. I have been able to confirm Liliana-sama's divine protection. The "Divine protection of telepathy" is, so to speak, a divine protection which transmits the owner's thought to others. It's a divine protection which primarily just transmits trivial thoughts to companions whom the owner shares a close bond with, but a song, huh? I hadn't even thought of something like that."

While Reinhard was honestly admiring Liliana, Subaru's jaw dropped after seeing him with such a face from his side.

Since Reinhard's power was already a cheat, this guy, who was said to be beyond superhuman, was being loved way too much by the gods.

The divine protection he needed, that divine protection which he thought of turned up in his possession or something if he wished for it.

"Subaru: ———?"

Barely managing to reach even a thought, Subaru picked up on what happened.

He could acquire a divine protection he thought of if he wished for it. At least it could only be expressed with what happened to the present Reinhard himself. Though that in and of itself was an extremely and reassuringly enviable power. Since it seemed likely that he was mistaken about something, Subaru did not finish his remark.

The members of the Wrath capture group were decided —— Priscilla, Al and Liliana.

Chapter 47: The Prelude To Retaking The City

"Subaru: Let's leave the task of dealing with "Wrath" to Priscilla's team for now. Reinhard has given us his seal of approval about Liliana's Divine Protection"

"Reinhard: An unfamiliar Divine Protection may not sound very reassuring. But, if it's Liliana-sama's song, I believe it will be an effective countermeasure against what we've heard about "Wrath""

Following Subaru and Reinhard's remarks, the gazes of the round table participants turned to Liliana. She was playing with her hair, holding it under her nose pretending it was a beard,

"Liliana: No~ problem~! Please leave it to me! This Liliana, once she gets a request, definitely gets the work done. Rest assured. I only sing. Singing where I'm desired the songs that are desired! Isn't that such a happy thing! And if I could get some tips as well, I'll throw up my arms and cheer!"

"Subaru: You aren't getting any tips out of this, so shut up with the capitalist-pig talk"

"Liliana: *Bu-hi*—— !"

The excited Liliana deflated, and Priscilla let out a snort in her stead. She swept her crimson eyes over Subaru and Reinhard in turn, and,

"Priscilla: And here I was wondering what you two were gossiping about, but it seems you were merely wasting your energy on useless consultation. I've already confirmed that singer's worth myself. We'll crush that raving fool"

"Subaru: Even if you say that, we still have to make sure....."

"Priscilla: Imbecile. ——I am the one staking my life on this singer. Why would I insist on this if I'm not certain already? As if I would take such reckless risks"

"Subaru: ————"

Priscilla's words did not leave Subaru any room to object. Indeed, the one

who suggested using Liliana against “Wrath” was Priscilla herself.

In spite of her manner of speech and attitude, it was well-known that her prudence and cleverness were exceptional.

"Al: Princess-san, don't bully the bro too much. Let's just stay quiet, us two"

"Priscilla: What's that, Al? Do you dare to contradict me, worm? A man sulking like a girl at your age. Do not degrade yourself in my presence"

"Al:’s not like that"

Turning away his gaze with a swish, Al rested his chin on his right arm and entered complete-observer mode. Seeing her servant's reaction, Priscilla leaned back into her chair and let the matter drop.

Finally, it seemed like the conversation could proceed with the next topic.

"Subaru: And with that, the attack on “Wrath” will be left to Priscilla's team. Next up..... would be “Lust”. As for who should handle that one, I would like to nominate Wilhelm-san"

"Julius: Nominating Wilhelm-sama? May I ask what your reasoning is?"

"Wilhelm: I have humbly requested as much from Subaru-dono, Julius-dono"

Towards the wondering Julius, Wilhelm raised his hand and answered. The old swordsman collected his gaze—— and slightly shifted it upstairs.

"Wilhelm: As you all know, my mistress Crusch-sama is suffering still under the effects of the Witch “Lust”'s cruel power. As Crusch-sama's servant, I am obligated to fight for my mistress. This is also a wish of mine that goes beyond my sense of duty"

"Anastasia: If possible, you want to capture the Sin Archbishop alive, and ask 'em about those symptoms. Is Wilhelm-san's motive somethin' like that?"

"Wilhelm: It is as you say. As such, please leave the subjugation of “Lust” to me"

His blue eyes, imbued with indomitable will, gave off a swordsman's-aura that washed over the room.

Seeing the determination and loyalty harbored within Wilhelm's gaze—— no one could raise a half-hearted word against it.

No one, except his own flesh and blood.

"Reinhard: Honestly, I'm against it"

"Wilhelm:Reinhard"

While everyone was overwhelmed by his swordsman's-aura, only Reinhard's expression did not change. Staring at Wilhelm with his usual serious expression,

"Reinhard: Currently grandfather has lost his composure. Of course, to feel hostility towards the Sin Archbishop who harmed Crusch-sama is understandable. However, I do not believe that you will be able to achieve the objective with that mentality"

"Wilhelm: I've lost my calm and that will interfere with the objective? Is that what you are telling me?"

"Reinhard: If only for Crusch-sama, failing to capture "Lust" would be unforgivable. Therefore, I will take on that task. At least, I will be able to face her with a better mental state"

Reinhard was right, at least in terms of ensuring as much certainty as possible. Wilhelm was being too brash and was losing his composure, he wasn't wrong about that.

But, in front of Reinhard's proposal, Wilhelm loosened his lips.

Devoid of the slightest tenderness, it was like the smile of a wild beast.

"Wilhelm: ——Losing calmness here is a given, Reinhard"

"Reinhard: Nevertheless, grandfather....."

"Wilhelm: Just who do you think your grandfather is? I am the Sword Demon Wilhelm. My only purpose had been to swing a sword, yet I couldn't help but fall for the woman I loved... and though in my way of life I am distracted halfway, in the end, for what needed to be done, I have never let it go unfinished!"

A fierce smile came over Wilhelm's usually clear and benign impression. It was reminiscent of blood, iron, and life set aflame, like a demon whose heart had been torn away by a blade.

Yet even here, there was still a touch of warmth in the demon's eyes.

"Wilhelm: When I decide to wield the sword, my heart is uplifted. Losing my calm or not, on the battlefield it's all the same to me. That is how I have lived on to this age. This time too, I have no intention of rotting away without repaying my obligation to my mistress in full. Your pointless worry is unnecessary"

"Reinhard: Even so, it's not just a matter of idealism....."

"Wilhelm: An ideal held to the end becomes conviction. Even though it took fourteen years, this blunted sword still fulfilled my vengeance against the enemy that killed my wife"

Listening to Wilhelm conviction, which slew the White Whale and repaid his grandmother's death in full, Reinhard couldn't say a thing. But even then, Reinhard lowered his eyes, unconvinced. At the obstinate posture of his grandson, with "Besides....." Wilhelm continued,

"Wilhelm: This one is not your field of battle. The battle in which you are needed is elsewhere"

"Reinhard: The battle in which I'm needed....."

"Wilhelm:— —Subaru-dono. Please take my grandson with you to your battle. To rescue Emilia-sama, you will be fighting against "Greed". Reinhard should act as your sword"

Suddenly hearing his name, Subaru opened his eyes wide. As if pulled along by the nodding Wilhelm, Reinhard's gaze also turned to him. Seeing this, Subaru scratched his head, deciding that it can't be helped.

"Subaru: I actually wanted to wait until the matter of "Lust" was sorted out before mentioning this..... But, yeah. Your power is frankly something I want to borrow for my fight against "Greed". For killing that sick bastard, I think I'll definitely need your strength"

Regulus of "Greed" floated into his mind. According to his fragmented knowledge of the Sin Archbishop's abilities, the power Regulus possessed was the most dangerous of them all. Though he could not say for sure, in the current situation, he could not imagine calling it by anything other than a stupid word like "Invincible". Of course, he

did not want to think of him as a simply “Invincible” existence. There had to be some kind of weakness or limitation about it.

"Subaru: To break through the “Invincible” defense of Regulus, we’ll need to fight him with an equally strong offense. His offensive and defensive capabilities are probably the strongest of the Sin Archbishops, I think. So I want to borrow Reinhard’s strength when we attack him"

"Reinhard: An untouchable opponent..... Certainly, for a monster such as that, I would be the right choice. However..."

Even after hearing of Regulus’ absurd power, Reinhard’s hesitation did not disappear. But, seeing Reinhard’s worries, another voice rang out. That sound was coming from none other than the one next to Subaru.

"Garfiel: ——Right then. Gramps Wilhelm’ll just be goin’ with me"

Striding forward was Garfiel, gnashing his sharp fangs as he glared at Reinhard. Surprised, Reinhard looked back at Garfiel as if to say “*You?*”.

"Garfiel: Th’Captain chose you. N’ I know ‘bout yer skills as well. So I won’t be needed for rescuin’ Emilia-sama, then. Right, Captain?"

"Subaru: No, Garfiel... I wouldn’t say it like that....."

"Garfiel: I don’t need comfortin’. And I’m not sayin’ this stuff ‘cause I’m sulkin’. It’s the other way around. This time, there’s another bastard I gotta take care of"

His brows furrowing at the roughly breathing Garfiel’s attitude, Subaru finally realized it.

Indeed. Among those who had been transformed by “Lust” during the retaking of the City Hall, there had been one person who was close to Garfiel—— the person who was turned into a black dragon.

And so, for Garfiel, “Lust” was not just an unrelated opponent. Besides——

"Garfiel: It’s true we can’t forgive that bitch, but it ain’t jus’ that. Back when I fought with that duo, “Lust” was there..."

"Subaru: ————"

"Garfiel: 'Cause of my mistake, there's an idiot that got injured who shouldn't have been. That's why I gotta give as good as we got. 'N so, I'll be followin' gramps out there"

Receiving Garfiel's keen gaze, Wilhelm silently nodded. With this, the old swordsman and the young warrior were united in their desire for vengeance. At the root of it all, both of them driven by thoughts of a woman they cared about.

Seeing Garfiel's expression, Subaru too had nothing more to say.

"Subaru: It might be a bit late at this point, but, "Lust"'s power is Variation and Change. She alters herself and can also force mutations onto others. And, her blood. No matter what, do not let her blood touch you. It's what caused Crusch-san's injuries. Personality-wise..... they're all terrible, but she's especially bad"

"Wilhelm: Understood"

"Garfiel: We'll stomp 'em and crush 'em"

At Subaru's final confirmation, neither Wilhelm nor Garfiel showed any sign of backing down.

Finally, Subaru looked to Reinhard, and even the Sword Saint, faced the firmness of their resolve, seemed to have lost the desire to object.

"Reinhard: Very well. I am certain of Garfiel's ability. And if grandfather is there, together, they can slay whatever enemy they may face, that much is assured"

"Garfiel: Even if y'say it like that, it ain't really satisfyin'. 'S like, *"Torktoi's modest but 's taste's superb"*, y'know"

"Reinhard: I do mean it. I have no doubt that you and grandfather will prevail. And I myself will act as Subaru's sword"

Garfiel scratched his face with an uncomfortable look while Reinhard nodded at Subaru. Hearing the Sword Saint's dependable words, Subaru felt like he'd been reinforced by an army of ten thousand men.

"Subaru: Sorry for the selfish request, Reinhard"

"Reinhard: It is fine. No matter where my battlefield is, I will give it my utmost. If that will be of help to you, then I can wish for nothing more"

"Subaru: And sorry for always relying on you. I'll be relying on your strength, but..... I'll also try to fill in any parts where you're lacking, so please look forward to it"

"Reinhard: ———"

Hearing those words, Reinhard suddenly widened his eyes and fell silent. Subaru tilted his head at this rarely-seen reaction, and Reinhard quickly smiled with "No",

"Reinhard: For you... that would be no problem at all. ——Right, I will look forward to it. You filling in for me... the parts that I cannot reach"

"Subaru: ——? O-oooh, then leave it to me. Leave it to me. Now then, it's probably obvious from the flow of the conversation, but, next up would have to be "Gluttony""

"Julius: ——Then, Ricardo and I will take care of it"

Following after Subaru's words, the one agreeing in a low voice was Julius. Hearing him speak in a rough voice which was unlike him, Anastasia directed a concerned gaze at the knight.

"Anastasia: Julius, you alright? Since before, your complexion isn't lookin' so good.."

"Julius: I apologize for causing you anxiety. However, I am fine. When speaking of comforts and discomforts of the body, I cannot make something like weak complaints in front of Subaru."

"Subaru: What do you mean, by that."

"Julius: Of course, I was thinking of your difficulties with your leg when I spoke. Please do not snap at me like that. In a situation like this, I have no intention of getting into arguments with you."

"Subaru: Mu....."

He took a lot of damage from a motive that he hadn't thought of. At the same time, he felt a strange sense of something being out of place. Julius' appearance seemed suspicious to him just as it had been for Anastasia. Why that was, he still didn't know, but even then..

"Julius: Ricardo and I will be taking the leftover responsibility of handling "Gluttony". Originally, Subaru and Wilhelm-sama would have served as his opponent. Due to their ties with him, they would have wanted to manage it themselves. Because you assigned this task to us while enduring those feelings, we will definitely carry it out for both of you to see."

"Subaru:Aah, it's like that."

What Julius felt was, Subaru would have wanted to subjugate "Gluttony" himself. Wilhelm would too, and above them now the still-suffering Crusch would have felt the same.

By the memory-eating, name-consuming "Gluttony"'s authority—Thinking of the still sleeping Rem who had suffered that damage, Subaru wanted to crush "Gluttony" completely with his own hand.

Hitting, kicking, stomping on him, forcing him to regret the atrocities he has committed, to turn his face into a teary mess as he forced him to bow down to the ground until he felt catharsis, that was what he wanted to do.

That role, he had given over to others——.

"Subaru: No matter who it is, honestly, I don't want to leave it to them. Rem.. I wanted to restore her. I wanted to get her back myself. I believed that doing that was my role."

"Julius:"

"Subaru: But, if it won't do unless I entrust it to someone, then I'll leave it to you. Don't get the wrong idea. It's the process of elimination.....That it's by process of elimination there's no doubt, but I will leave it to you. For me, you're the only one I can tolerate handing this role to, even if I don't like it.

Rem's very memory and existence, was being held hostage. Emilia's freedom had been taken away, and she was still waiting for help to come.

Both of them were precious relations to Subaru, both of them were precious

people he had to get back, and so to both of them Subaru wanted to show them his cool side.

However, Subaru was Emilia's knight, and Rem's hero too, so.

"Subaru: I will topple "Greed", and I will rescue Emilia. Blowing away "Gluttony", I'll hand it to you.....Don't screw it up."

"Julius: ——To your expectations, I will respond. Especially this time, definitely this time."

With a firm nod, Julius accepted Subaru's yielding.

The knight called the "Greatest" then gazed towards Wilhelm, and inclined his head slightly.

"Julius: Wilhelm-sama."

"Wilhelm: Of what I wanted to say, Subaru-dono has spoken most of that for me. It is true that I do not have the most harmonious feelings for "Gluttony"..... And so too, I will entrust it to Julius-dono. There are too many scoundrels caught up in this."

From that Sword Demon growing sharp, Julius seemed to gain a bit of courage. Ricardo, who had until then quietly observed their talk, now said

"Ricardo: An' what's this, my thoughts don' even seem to be heard in this talk goin' on. I don't even get to be cared that much, 's that it! Now that this lineup so far 's the best, I can agree to that."

"Anastasia: Ricardo really is wantin' attention. Gettin' miffed like that with your big size doesn't really look cute, you know.....Julius, I will ask of you."

"Ricardo: Relax. Have ya ever see me lyin'? Ana-bo."

"Anastasia: Usin' that title, could you rightly stop that? I'm, Ricardo's mistress you know."

Ricardo guffawed loudly at the sight of Anastasia's miffed face and puffed up cheeks. The black-iris eyes that gazed down on Anastasia, had a very kind glint in them.

"Subaru: Then, with this, the lineups are decided, right."

—Following Subaru's remark, all those present at the round table nodded their heads.

"Subaru: For the attack on Sirius of "Wrath", Priscilla and Al. Counting Liliana, that's three in all."

"Priscilla: The notion that mine self may succumb to the toying of emotions is a laughable one indeed. Showing mine opponent how they were in the wrong place at the wrong time while facing the wrong enemy, such a helpless fool deserves a lesson!"

"Liliana: I only sing~, I only sing~ It's what I am, just a lump of meat that sings! Do not cherish your life, cherish the stage. Okay, good, I feel like I can do it. Right now, I really feel like I can do it!"

"Subaru: ———"

Priscilla fanned herself as Liliana engaged in questionable self-hypnosis. Al's face could not be seen, but the impression that he was still not convinced seemed to come from his whole body.

Though it was a mildly unsettling trio, confidence-wise they were the strongest there.

"Subaru: Next up, for the capturing of "Lust", Garfiel and Wilhelm-san."

"Garfiel: Got it. My amazin' self will grab 'em by the throat, 'n make 'em cry, 'n say sorry."

"Wilhelm: Please leave it to me.——With the both of us, it is assured."

The pair with the most fighting spirit, could it be said to be these two? The Sword Demon Wilhelm had his mistress' obligation, and also his wife, who he could not forget even for a moment. As for Garfiel, there was some form inside him that could not be grasped, some emotion that made his feelings shake. Perhaps these two warriors both sought some answers in the battle ahead, he couldn't be sure if that's how they felt.

"Subaru: And for the conquest of "Gluttony", it's the two of you, Julius and Ricardo."

"Julius: By none other than you both, we have been entrusted this task. It will certainly be resolved. Like this, then, I will negate him."

"Ricardo: My family, those damn bastards made 'em suffer. I don't need t' hear those words to know. I'll punch 'em, hit 'em hard and make 'em cry."

This pair had the least connections to the Witch Cult. And yet they could safely be expected to not fall behind the others, since it was definitely certain that both were highly respected opponents.

Together, he had already overcome hardship with them. Nowhere in these comrades-in-arms lay any cause for doubt.

Because of that, the choice to yield the detestable "Gluttony" was made possible.

"Subaru: The last one is "Greed", with Reinhard and I making two. I'm counting on you?"

"Reinhard: —Aah, leave it to me. I am depending on you as well, Subaru."

At Subaru's request, Reinhard nodded his head with his usual resolute attitude. But something in his draped mien seemed soft, and while in the middle of battle it may strike one as insincere, but now his appearance seemed to overflow with humanity.

Why it was such a reassuring look, Subaru could not know.

"Subaru: Then, with this, the choices for the fights are decided. And on the matter of choosing places to set up communication mirrors for reports, there are three of them in all. Assuming I leave one in City Hall....For the others left, what should we do?"

"Subaru: Personally, I definitely want someone to take one for "Wrath". And one to..... "Lust" or "Gluttony", one of those two would be nice, I think."

"???: What are your reasons?"

"Subaru: "Wrath" is someone with influence over the whole city. By whether they fall or not, the situation that befalls the city will be changed. Therefore, that news is something I want to be able to share quickly."

Regarding the use of communication mirrors, they all nodded as if Subaru's suggestion was the truth. As for the reason for bringing a different one to

"Greed",

"Subaru: It doesn't really need to be said, but Reinhard will be with "Greed". Assuming anything more about "Greed" than his power being unknown is optimistic, but I can't say that the possibility of it being handled instantly doesn't exist. If it becomes like that, I want to set up a situation where Reinhard can be sent as reinforcements."

"Reinhard: However, unless the team at "Greed" possesses a communication mirror, then sharing that information is impossible, is it not? But, I certainly believe that Natsuki-san's opinion is largely correct."

"Subaru: The answer to that is simple. Use the broadcast magic device. With a city-wide broadcast, I want us to keep everyone informed of places that need help. Using the communication mirror, Anastasia-san will organize all the information, and will take on the responsibility of conveying it to everyone. How's that?"

"Anastasia: I'm thinkin' that's wise. Your head seems t' work well sometimes, Natsuki-kun."

Anastasia laughed with an impressed look, and tossed a communication mirror at Priscilla.

Priscilla caught it with her fan, and rolled it in front of Liliana.

"Liliana: Wa, wa, wah!?"

"Priscilla: Singer, you take it. Since mine self cannot lift anything heavier than tableware."

"Liliana: That fan, it's almost as heavy as some dishes. Don't say pompous things."

"Priscilla: Do not speak so foolishly, inspect this design. Gold is hung and inlaid from it luxuriously, and from just that it is weighty. Do not toss it in with the likes of dishes."

"Liliana: Isn't that heavier than the dishes....."

Regardless of what she said, in the end Liliana wound up taking it. Ignoring Liliana, who was quickly fixing her hair in the mirror, the last communication

mirror was passed to Wilhelm.

"Subaru: Considering the number of enemies, the "Lust" side will need a mirror more than the group for "Gluttony". Two people will be fine, I thinking, but contact Anastasia right away if it seems dangerous."

"Wilhelm: Understood, I will be sure to contact her."

Showing consideration for Julius, Wilhelm placed the mirror in his breast pocket.

However, it was a slightly worrying judgment. As it is, Wilhelm could become hot with fury and ignore the instructions from now. And Garfiel, needless to say, was the type to explode at the slightest provocation.

—Regardless, like this the battle preparations were complete.

"Subaru: I'll leave, a little more time. When that ends we will start, the Control Towers Recapture Operation commences."

At Subaru's words, all present replied by nodding their heads. However, seeing their quiet, tense appearances, Subaru thought the mood was bad anyhow.

"Subaru: If you're making angry faces, don't you get the feeling that bad stuff gets closer?"

"Otto: Once more a sign that Natsuki-san will say something strange occurred."

"Subaru: It's not weird. It's important. No matter how large of an army gathers, if morale is low, it can turn into a rabble. I'm not saying our morale is low here, but I don't think my motives are bad. So, let's raise our voice."

While clapping his hands, Subaru stood up.

"Subaru: Let's clean it all up, everyone! With this fight, get rid of the the city-disturbing bastards! The Witch Cult fails and we get a happy end!"

"Others: —"

At Subaru's urging, they looked at each others' faces. Then, nodding,

"Others: Hooooh—!!"

Like that, a high-morale reply came back.

If they can give such a strong answer, then they'll definitely be fine.

This many members, this much of a vanguard, it wasn't something that could just be prepared again.

—The city recapture, began in earnest.

"Subaru: —This fight, is our victory!!"

With Subaru saying whatever he wanted, the round table meeting concluded.

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Sometime later, her muffled sensations recovering, her consciousness slowly returned to reality.

As reality started to permeate through drowsy senses, the feelings in her hands and feet naturally returned. Then, while feeling spread through the rest of her body, her first sensation was of something soft embracing her.

Warm, it was relaxing like a large animal's fur had wrapped her up. She had felt something similar quite a long time ago. A long time ago, back when she was young, a time when her body could not follow the fairies, a time when she feared sleeping alone. Now far from the feeling of that fur's texture, quite some time had passed since then.

"Emilia: ——Ah."

At first, her eyes welled with tears from its nostalgic touch. Putting aside her silly desire to keep feeling the warmth, she slowly opened her eyes. Her long eyelashes shivered, and amethyst irises blankly noted the world.

She was in a room with high ceilings, and decorations she had never seen before. Lying on a bed there, she found herself wrapped up in a summer blanket crafted from quality fur. A stranger seated beside her had been cleaning her face with a wet towel.

"Emilia: You're.....?"

"???: ——"

Looking down on her when she opened her eyes was, a beautiful woman with a pure-white face.

On the rather sickly, blood-drained face, a pretty and expressionless face like a doll's was attached. Her beauty was such that she would surely light up the room if she smiled, but her face was rigidly held like a mask which could not laugh.

Rising, her long hair waving behind her, the woman in a black dress left the room right away.

She quickly tried to call out to her, but as she fretted on how to call her while not knowing her name, the door clicked shut. As such, she found herself alone.

"Emilia: Here...I wonder where that is?"

Hesitantly, she sat up on the bed.

Though she was faintly weary, no pain or signs of poor condition could be felt.

The heaviness must be from using too much magic she was not yet used to, as it was a sign that her body was unable to withstand it.

Having gotten that far, right away she remembered the rest of what had occurred in her situation.

"Emilia: Right. Ah, at the square, I fought a strange person, and....."

Continuing on, in her head the events from just before she lost consciousness came to mind.

A monster with a face wrapped in bandages——The one Subaru had called "Wrath", had come for her with fearsome combat prowess and downright creepy amounts of anger. For a moment, she had taken on the fight at an advantage, but then losing to the force of fiercely burning flames, she had been sent flying——.

"Emilia: And then, I must have passed out. But, I'm still alive."

As she was outmatched, there was no doubt it had been a desperate situation.

Someone had probably come to her aid. Subaru and Beatrice had been there, it could be she was rescued by those two. Even then, her heart was crushed by her own patheticness.

Emilia had struck such a pose at Subaru, and had talked really loudly, but not

only had she lost, she needed to be helped too.

"Emilia: Mmh, there isn't any time to be dejected. Even if I don't do that, I'm already late to depart, so there isn't time to pause in my steps and repent. I'll repent while walking."

Tapping her snow white cheeks with both hands, she raised her spirits. Time spent depressed was time squandered.

Having been provided a bed and blanket. And even being watched over by a caretaker, this place must be a benevolent someone's home. Since she hadn't been taken to her own place, her situation may have been quite severe.

"Emilia: But I can't feel any pain, so maybe a skilled healer.....Eeh?"

While moving to stand, Emilia came to realize something about herself.

"Emilia: I'm, naked."

At the point bare feet touched the floor, she noticed that not a single piece of cloth was draped on her body. Emilia's head tilting, she first wrapped the blanket around her body and got down from the bed. Gazing around the room, she looked around hoping for something to wear, but regrettably could not find anything.

"Emilia: Mmh, what should I do? If I leave the room like this, I'll be thought of as bad-mannered....."

Before leaving the forest, when she was studying matters on leaving the forest, and learning lots of things from Puck, that point had been energetically enough placed in her head.

She shouldn't show skin in front of others. Following that rule, then her own appearance right now was completely a problem,

"Emilia: But, since I'm worried about everyone, it's an emergency so it can't be helped."

The battle with the Sin Archbishops, how it had concluded, she had to find out as quickly as possible. With that task as justification, Emilia emerged from the room garbed in a single blanket.

Walking out to the corridor, it was definitely not a building she had ever seen before. Just, compared to how she imagined it, the outside of the room gave an

oddly unsophisticated impression of a cold hallway.

"Emilia: I thought I was somewhere like a mansion, but that was totally wrong. Mmh, is it just this room that's strange?"

Turning back, she saw the room where she had slept in. A big bed, and a small wardrobe. However, upon closer inspection, she could not escape the impression that something was unbalanced about it. It gave the impression of a bed and other furniture bought and messily piled inside an empty room.

And that might not be wrong. By checking the atmosphere of the corridor, this was definitely not a place meant for people to live in. This was a place where people worked. If she focused her ears, the faint sound of water and a hint of something could be heard.

While Emilia puzzled over that, there——.

"???: Ah, it seems you've opened your eyes, how relieving, what a relief. I'm relieved you're safe."

Spoken to so, Emilia turned back. Just then, at the far end of the corridor, a young man emerged. Having discovered Emilia, the white-haired youth grinned at her.

"???: However, I'm not comfortable with you walking around right after waking. Various things happened and you had a big day, so if there's something with your body it's a headache. That part, I'm telling you to go about your work with certain care. Moreover since it's not just your body, I mean."

"Emilia: Then, you are.....?"

Blinking, Emilia gazed at the young man speaking to her. That attitude of narrowing the gap between others with a single step was somewhat close to Subaru's. However, the crucial difference between Subaru and him, was that his attitude had no intention of respecting the other person. That was Subaru's timid virtue, and the young man in front of her did not show any hint of it. It was as if he did not have any remorse for others.

——At the same time, Emilia was recalling a feeling she could not reveal to

the young man in front of her.

"???: Is that so, sorry, sorry. I've even seen your sleeping face, but this is your first time seeing me I'd say. I haven't even given you my name yet. No matter how you're in a relationship with me, this kind of impolite attitude won't do. I was too hasty on that point, it is my fault. Truly, like I'm sorry I will apologize. Since I am a human being capable of such things."

"Emilia: Y-yes....."

Emilia's reply to that endlessly, fluently speaking young man was quite heavy. The reason for that may be that his attitude overwhelmed her, but a more significant meaning was contained within. That was, Emilia's subconscious was appealing to her.

—This young man, somewhere, I remember seeing him before.

"???: It's a waste of a scene, it's a shame that this place lacks atmosphere. But I believe this too, when you look back, will think of as a special moment. If you look at it that way it's not even a bad thing. A small happiness day-by-day is just, more than enough to make the path known as life brighten up. If it's with you, then I definitely especially think so. Not just as being in a bad place, but seeing the nice sides of it, that's the way of life want to try. Do you not think so too, Emilia?"

"Emilia: I, do not remember telling you my name.....So, you are?"

"???: Oops, sorry. When my feelings get too lofty, without knowing it myself I stop noticing my surroundings, it is a bad habit of mine. It is for that reason, that I sometimes dislike my affectionate personality. It could be that you are the one making me feel so deeply. And, my name, was it."

After an incredibly long and flexible detour, this young man was barely entering the main building.

Feeling warning tingles burn her skin, Emilia did not take her eyes off of the young man's actions. That her own safety was at risk, she intuitively understood.

And the cause of that intuition was, the young man in front of her.

"Regulus: My name is Regulus Corneas. I hold an executive position in a

certain group, but something like that is not important to you. What is indeed important to you is just one thing. That I am your husband, and that you are my 79th wife."

"Emilia:Eeh?"

The young man gave a name—What Regulus marvelously spoke of, the meaning of it she did not understand. Emilia fretted, and her pretty brows frowned. But, Regulus was not paying Emilia's reaction any mind, and was staring at the body of a girl covered only with a single light cloth,

"Regulus: That appearance is poison to the eyes. I'll order a change of clothes to be brought over right away. You can relax. They are in the same situation as you, my other wives. Putting on wedding attire is something they would have gotten used to."

"Emilia: A wedding dress, what do you mean? No, it isn't just that. Calling me your wife, what are you saying?"

"Regulus: Right. I was forgetting something important! For one such as myself, that was dangerous."

Emilia opened her mouth to ask another question, but Regulus was not listening. He clapped his hands, and lightly grabbed Emilia's shoulder as she was about to ask. As she felt the odd amount of force coming from those fingers, Emilia frowned. Drawing close enough to touch Emilia's forehead, Regulus gazed into her eyes.

"Regulus: I was forgetting an important, important question. Your awareness of the wedding comes after this. Emilia, this is important, so I want you to answer carefully. For our future, it's very important."

"Emilia: ——"

At that weird level of pressure, Emilia swallowed her breath and was silent. Taking her attitude as assent, Regulus smiled. With a smile, he asked.

"Regulus: Emilia, are you a virgin? That's all, it's really important."

With a smile, he spoke.